

Workshop 7

An Anthropology of the Transformers of Waste

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In recent years, an increasing amount of attention has been devoted in anthropology and material culture studies to the creation of value, and to its objectification under different material forms. Anthropologists are now moving beyond the study of the uses of objects originally designed as artefacts and commodities, so as to better account for the social relations coming into existence in the wake of consumption. In the light of recent theoretical work on the flow of objects within and between the local and the global, the study of the re-creation of networks of people and objects is revitalised by the consideration of materiality and the potential of hybrid forms to impact upon configurations of social and economic relations. Along this line, this workshop aims at exploring how waste objects (namely objects that have been divested by their original consumers) are put back in circulation, and by whom. It focuses on the people, the actors and the institutions working at transforming waste: the intermediaries who operate in the shadow of producers, and who are often neglected in consumption studies. This session aims to bring together social anthropologists working on recycling and recuperation in different cultural contexts. We particularly seek input from people working on charity organisations, art recycling alongside the informal/industrial economy, etc. What roles do these intermediaries play in the transformation of waste objects? What kinds of relations between people take shape through the transformation of waste objects? How do these intermediaries help connecting people from different contexts? Or, on the opposite, contribute to keep them at distance?

“Fayuca Ormiga”. The Cross-Cultural Trade of Used Clothing on Mexico-United States Border

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Used clothing is a prohibited import in Mexico, but it is found everywhere in urban markets. The use of the metaphor of “ant traffic” (fayuca ormiga) to describe the underground crossborder trade between U.S. and Mexico conveys the complexity of these networks of cross-border traders and their persistence in

the face of the official rules. Grounded in ethnographic fieldwork conducted in the twin cities of Ciudad Juarez (Mexico) and El Paso (U.S.), this paper analyses the informal trade of secondhand clothing at the border. This trade, described by the New York Times (12/11/1997) as one of the U.S.'s "biggest exports -- in volume, if not in dollars -- to its southern neighbour", takes on particular relevance in the light of similar research recently conducted on the issue of textile recycling. This paper will shed light on the role of a wide array of intermediaries who regularly cross the international border to buy second-hand clothes from U.S. garage sales, flea markets, and "por libra" stores (which sell used clothing by the pound rather than the piece) in order to put them back in circulation on the Mexican market. In contrast to the desired linear trajectory of goods in a consumer capitalist economy, this paper aims to show how the economy of recycling on the Mexico-U.S. border often collapses the boundary between consumption and waste through exploring this vast economy of resignification, recombination, and recycling in which meanings are transformed as part of everyday use.

"Mutilated Hosiery": The Recycling of Clothing in the Punjabi Shoddy Trade

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This paper addresses a particular transformation of second hand Western clothing imported into India which remains invisible both to those of us from the developed world who cast out the unwanted garments and to most Indian end consumers as well. India has a protectionist trade policy which prohibits the importation of used clothing; however a lack of virgin wool from which to make winter clothing has resulted in a permitted trade in old woollens as a resource for recycling into new products. To prevent their diversion into the flourishing black market, jumpers and jackets are slashed at the point of origin and known as "mutilated hosiery". In large factories across the Punjabi plains, these garments are stripped of their linings, buttons, and brand labels and sorted into colour families. Utilising the "shoddy" process, the clothes are destroyed by being shredded, pulped and spun into yarn once more, thus losing all trace of their previous form and being reduced back down to their most basic fibre constituents in pure colours. The reclaimed thread is then woven into new blankets, shawls, and suiting, becoming a fully Indianised product sold across the country and indeed reexported to the West as part of the global trade in garments. The paper explores the transformation of value through processes which connect the local to the global through obscure networks of translation, in particular the extended family and business networks which operate between manufacturers in the Punjab and exporters in the USA and the UK.

Cloths that Open up Social Networks

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This paper seeks to examine the moral economy of cloths recycling undertaken by Dress for Success in North America. This non-for-profits organisation was founded in 1996 in New York City by Nancy Lublin, a 25-year old law student. In the years that followed, it expanded to numerous cities in the US and to other locations abroad such as Canada, England, and New Zealand. Its main purpose is to give disenfranchised and disadvantaged women the tools that will help them successfully make the transition into the workplace. Its particularity is to achieve this goal through the recuperation and recycling of second hand clothing among women and business women, and to distribute those to other women referred by non profit job agencies that are partners in preparation of job interviews. The study of Dress for Success unveils the complexity of the recuperation of cloths, and its relationship with business sectors as sources of provisioning and inspiration. It reveals how the pragmatic discourse on clothing and self presentation that is conveyed by Dress for Success representatives in the media relies on a certain myth of success in which the material culture is imbued with liberating powers. Beyond this fetishism however, used cloths act more as the point of entry onto broader social networks. Indeed, the recuperation of clothing becomes a template opening up on wider social networks.

Things Go Round and Round, Round and Round

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This paper will explore the complex processes of divestment in Japan, an example of a consumer society with a thriving gift economy. In Japan, a large number of mass-produced goods enter the home as gifts and my study will focus on the role initial recipients of these commodities play in mediating their value as they are moved out of the domestic arena into new cycles of consumption. The relationships gifts embody are important in deciding their trajectories. However, specific spatial and social pressures in the domestic arena and the particular material properties of each commodity also influence whether they are kept and consumed, moved through endless cycles of gifting and re-gifting, or end up for sale at flea markets, bazaars, or school fairs. In other cultural context these types of informal retail spaces, mentioned above, are mainly associated with goods that have been partly consumed by their initial owners. However, my Japanese case study suggests that those commodities that are easily recognisable as unused gifts are most likely to be successfully passed on or re-distributed through second-hand

channels.

Recuperation and Abandonment

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Although I have spent several years researching some of the sites and spaces in which objects divested by their original consumers are recovered and put back in circulation – specifically in the UK context through car boot sales, charity shops and vintage/retro shops – in this paper I want to look at how the placement of divestments exerts critical effects on the transformations wrought to things. In my previous work these placements have been ones that locate divestments within second hand economies, be they informal or formal. For things to be recuperated here requires that ordinary consumers be able to create value through second hand exchange and consumption; literally, consumers need to be able to see and imagine the potential in divested things, and to reappropriate them accordingly. Other divested objects however are more appropriately thought of as abandoned. They are dumped or left behind by their original or last owners, at approved sites (in the UK, ‘the tip’) or cast aside, in roadside lay-byes, in field gates on the urban fringe, on playing fields or indeed on just about any available area of open space. Focusing on the latter, the paper uses ethnographic work in North-east England to explore two contrasting orientations to such placements, and their effect on the transformations wrought to abandoned things. The first orientation assumes the moral high ground, regarding abandoned things through a predominantly surface and visual aesthetic; as rubbish, out of place and dumped by an imagined cast of demonised and deviant others. In contrast, a second orientation adopts a more open, curious and depth sensibility, in which the potentiality of things remains, even in their abandonment. Although not artists in the acknowledged sense of the word, these ordinary consumers rescue and recuperate whole objects and parts of objects. For them, abandoned things are a resource, a way of life, of getting by and of constituting difference. Whilst the effect of this orientation is to bring abandoned things, either wholly or in part, back into consumption, if not circulation, the effect of the moral position is shown to cast them in a trajectory that connects local authority collection services to landfill sites and to constitute abandoned things as waste matter.

Ships of Relations: Navigating Between the Local and the Global in Cornish Recycled Maritime Art

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At a simple level, this paper is about recycling -- the transformation of objects intended for disposal but which instead become part of larger networks of re-use and re-appropriation. The idea, however, is to challenge and problematise superficial or prosaic

views of recycling so to consider more conceptual, holistic perspectives. Hence, the aim is to look at the transformations of some of Cornwall's historically significant industrial relics into works of art and thus into solid metaphors of cultural distinction. In questioning how some players in the 'art world' are investing a new imagination and creativity into abandoned possessions and derelict artefacts, the paper explores how many artists, sculptors, craft workers and theatre performance groups are in the process of regenerating Cornwall by repossessing its rubbish. One of the ultimate outcomes is therefore that they are invoking a recovery of social memory and a recycling of the past. By a particular emphasis on the conversion of Cornish fishing and mining materials into recycled art, the paper fundamentally addresses the recycling of identities, histories and social relations. It does so from an interdisciplinary approach grounded in social anthropology, human geography and material culture studies. Overall, my main concern is to signpost some of the ways in which certain material markers of prosperity and socio-economic hardship link up with a cultural resurgence that is brought about through creatively producing a second life of things.

From Nuclear Waste to a Temple of Consumerism

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What to do with divested concrete monstrosities that resist even the most sophisticated explosives? In Kalkar, near the Dutch-German border, the construction of an extremely contested nuclear power plant was achieved in 1985, but the German government decided in 1991 that it would never be commissioned. What to do with this 5 billion euro, very imposing but senseless piece of very peculiar 'nuclear' (non radioactive) waste which would even resist earthquakes or terrorist attacks? Its acquisition – for less than 5 million euro – by an ambitious entrepreneur, as well as its successive transformation into an enormous amusement park – visited each year by hundreds of thousands of visitors – constitute an excellent illustration of the 'neutralisation' of an architectural eyesore: disarmed and stripped of its undesirable connotations.

This paper explores the recuperation and transformation of an immovable and senseless eyesore – similar to the innumerable bunkers from the Second World War – in comparison to the removal of other undesirable buildings. Myth-making around the entrepreneur who recuperated and face-lifted Kalkar – portrayed in the media as an extremely successful self-made man – presents some interesting parallels with the 'heroisation' of the 'master of detonation' in case of a removal. The former is able to neutralise what the latter cannot annihilate. What do these people – the 'eliminator' and the 'recuperator' embody? What kind of access to, or control over the durability of architectural objects do they display?