



Harnessing the Unruly: Anthropological Contributions in Applied Reuse Projects

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ABSTRACT This article discusses the experiences of two anthropologists working on two applied collaborative projects, both with a focus on sustainable consumption, and both spin-offs from a more conventional academic research project on second-hand and reuse. Although different – one focusing on the reuse of office furniture in the public sector, the other on co-creating an exhibition at a state-run museum – both entailed interventions aiming to stimulate a transition to less damaging ways of living and consuming. Collaborating with a municipality, a state-run museum and a reuse design company, as well as various professional stakeholders in the sector, the anthropologists outline how being ‘unruly’ – probing deeper into seemingly self-evident questions, recontextualising issues, and making associations between domains – allowed them to provide new perspectives and formulate alternative understandings of how to meet the challenges. The main contributions of anthropology in applied settings are often said to be the methodological tools and techniques of the discipline, but in this case, insights from posthumanism significantly shaped the outcomes of the two projects. The authors argue that abstract theoretical insights can play an important role in providing solutions or understandings in concrete, applied situations.

Keywords: sustainable consumption, applied anthropology, collaboration, reuse, circular economy, posthumanism

Introduction

One of the major global challenges of our time is the question of how to transition to more sustainable and less environmentally damaging ways of living. The ecological footprint of consumption in Sweden is estimated at four times what is considered a long-term sustainable level (WWF 2016: 74-79). Swedish material consumption is still on the rise landing at a 9% increase from 2016 to 2018 (Naturvårdsverket 2018: 21; Sveriges Miljömål). Furthermore, quantities of waste are expected to increase by over thirty percent in Sweden by 2035, and two thirds of greenhouse emissions in Sweden come from consumption within households (Naturvårdsverket 2018: 11, 21). How then, can we find more sustainable approaches to the way we accumulate, live with, and discard things – the kind of stuff that overflows our everyday life and has become so central to our lifestyle – and in what ways can anthropology contribute to this?

As two anthropologists, working on a research project on consumption of second-hand and reuse objects that began in 2014, we found ourselves increasingly preoccupied with this question. The focus of the project was on the circulation of aging material culture in second-hand markets as an alternative form of heritage making (see below for details).

Through fieldwork in second-hand shops, flea markets and private homes we explored everyday practices of care for old things and were intrigued by the complex and sometimes contradictory ways that people live with and relate to their belongings and to their physical process of aging (Appelgren and Bohlin 2015, 2017; Appelgren 2019b; Bohlin 2019). As issues of environmental degradation, climate change, and sustainability became increasingly prominent topics, not just for us, but for our interlocutors, we began to recognise that these ways of relating to material culture offered important perspectives on the ‘throw-away society’ of mass consumption and consumerism often depicted and lamented in media and the academy (see Gregson et al. 2007 for a critique of the notion). We also found that our anthropological focus provided knowledge that various groups of professionals in the field considered not merely interesting, but in fact useful. Faced with increasing pressure to get staff, customers, or citizens to adopt new and more sustainable practices or modes of thinking, these professionals were keen to learn more about how people behave and think, and to find appropriate conceptual tools for communicating the changes that they considered necessary to implement. As a result, what began as a small-scale collaboration with a municipal museum, as part of the original research project, rapidly extended into a number of applied spin-off projects, where we collaborated with professionals in city management, interior design, and the heritage sector in order to address concrete problems related to private, corporate, and public consumption and global sustainability.

The sheer magnitude and urgency of the larger issue – the future of life on the planet – not only propelled us into applied collaborations outside institutional academic research, but also threw us into normative engagements which, unlike our previous academic research, did not stop at understanding, interpreting, and critiquing what we saw, but ultimately aimed at influencing and changing the way people think and act. Despite generally adhering to the common stance in anthropology of deferring moral judgments on social-cultural practices and norms encountered in the field, we became involved in projects where the stated goal was to transform human thinking and behaviour – in small and partial ways; here, to reuse more – to achieve a transition to less damaging ways of living and consuming. In what follows we reflect on these experiences and discuss how developments and challenges in the field resonated with processes within the academy. Like the Australian environmental humanities scholar, Gay Hawkins, we found ourselves “...working at the interface between interesting conceptual intellectual work and applied engaged research that’s tackling a global crisis” (Hawkins et al. 2019).

Applied anthropology is often thought of as the practice of enrolling anthropology in order to address human and societal problems (van Willigen 2002: ix). Methods, perspectives, and knowledge emerging out of the discipline are used for utilitarian purposes where “[t]he primary goal is getting things done” (Nolan 2017: 33). ‘Solving problems’ then, is central to applied anthropology, sometimes even to the point of defining it. But what is a problem and what does a problem do? The word ‘problem’ derives from the Greek word *proballein*, which in turn breaks down into *pro*, before, and *ballein*, to throw (Oxford Dictionary of English 2015). In other words a problem can be seen as something that is thrown before us: something that we find ourselves facing and which we need to consider and respond to. In what follows, we will outline how we used anthropological knowledge and tools to address problems in two applied projects. It will become clear that rather than merely accepting how the problems had been defined and offering solutions to them, what we did was primarily

to ‘throw’ the problems differently. Through being ‘unruly’ – probing deeper into seemingly self-evident questions, recontextualising issues, and making associations between domains – we tried to encourage critical thinking and reflection in order to formulate alternative understandings of how the challenges could be met.

The following account will draw on a longer history of collaborative work that we undertook in relation to our original research project, but the main focus will be on two distinct applied projects. The first, here called ROF (Reuse Office Furnishing), was a collaboration with a municipal department and an interior design company specialising in reuse interior design and furnishing.¹ From the City administration, we mainly worked with the Department of Sustainable Waste and Water, which housed a pilot project aimed at exploring ways of making the entire municipality more sustainable, both in terms of its citizens and in terms of internal administration. Together with the project leader and staff members from this initiative, and the owners of the interior design company, we wrote an application for funding for an eight-month project, which was granted by the Swedish Energy Agency. The aim of this project was to facilitate large-scale reuse of furniture and furnishings in public offices, using the City administration as a case study. Our motivation was that transition to sustainability is generally far easier to achieve within the private sector, which tends to be more flexible and more easily adapts to changing circumstances, than in the more rigidly structured and controlled public sector. If we could show that transition to increased reuse is possible within the City, then, we argued, this could set an example that others – for example, other cities, regional administrations, and private companies – could follow.²

The project was designed around exploring a series of obstacles or barriers to reuse. We had identified a number of such barriers that we believed would be useful to study, and part of the undertakings within the project was a series of workshops and think tanks, where we invited various stakeholders (architects, caretakers, sustainability officers, furniture producers and sellers, removal specialists, etc.) to discuss these barriers, as well as add more. The project thus had an open and inclusive approach built into its design in order to maximise its value to, and relevance for the users.

The second project, here called LwT (Living (with) Things), was undertaken with a state-run museum. We had approached the director of the museum, saying that we were interested in exploring possibilities for collaboration, and as it happened, the museum had just begun the planning of a major new exhibition on the theme of consumption and sustainability. After an initial meeting we decided to apply for separate funding for this collaboration, with the aim of jointly designing a physical component of the upcoming exhibition using findings from our research project, but also to implement a citizen science component in the exhibition feeding data into our research. In total, we had monthly or bi-monthly planning meetings for two years, and also held two workshops at the museum where we tried out prototypes for the exhibition with two focus groups from the public, one school class, and one adult choir. The result was a demarcated section of the exhibition called *Living (with) Things* which contained three visitors’ activities and formed part of

¹ The results of this project were published in a report (Appelgren et al. 2018).

² Relocations and reorganizations in both the private and the public sector routinely involve disposal of old furniture and purchase of new resulting in massive waste. In Sweden alone, office furniture is manufactured to the value of approx. 5,1 billion SEK (\$550 M) annually (TMF 2020: 7). Annual disposal is more difficult to measure.

the overall exhibition *Human:Nature. An exhibition about consumption and the future of the planet* that opened in February 2019 and will close in Stockholm in 2021. In addition, we helped design, and during 2019, participated in an experimental outreach component of the exhibition in the shape of a mobile, ‘pop-up’ exhibition that travelled to a number of locations throughout the city to meet new publics. Simply put, this ‘pop-up’ was a tiny caravan, entirely built from scrap material, peddled by a tandem bike. It contained informational material, miniature versions of some exhibits from the main exhibition, and a range of interactive material, used to engage passers-by. This was a new form of outreach that the museum had never tried before, and the theme of the ‘pop-up’ was based on our component of the main exhibition.

Both ROF and LwT came about as a result of activities within the cross-disciplinary research project *Re:heritage. Circulation and Marketization of Things with History*, funded by the Swedish Research Council, 2014-2019.

Reuse and circular economy

Before outlining the details of how we worked with anthropological knowledge and methods in the two projects, some words need to be said about the broader field that we came into, and how our approach differed from some of the dominant ways of thinking.

At the time that we began exploring reuse and second-hand consumption, discussions on the promises of the ‘circular economy’ (CE) had begun to emerge in Sweden. The concept circulated in national media, and in Gothenburg where we were doing fieldwork, various meetings, workshops, and lectures on the topic illustrated the growing interest in this new way of conceptualising the economy. Indeed, the City administration pilot project we collaborated with was called Circular Gothenburg. In short, CE thinking takes a systematic approach to the economy that should benefit industry, society, and the planet by disconnecting growth from resource exploitation. Inspired by the restorative and regenerative powers of ecological cycles in nature it argues for closing the loops of material flows in order to reduce resource extraction and waste production. In symbiotic networks corporations are supposed to turn waste and by-products into resources for production. Design for disassembling and recycling is crucial in this, as is design for care and repair in order to extend the lifespan of things before being returned for another production cycle (McDonough and Braungart, 2002; Webster, 2017). CE has received criticism, not least in regard to the limited evidence of large-scale practical CE cases (see Gregson et al. 2015; Blomsma and Brennan 2017; Valenzuela and Böhm 2017; Corvellec et al. 2020), but overall has been met with enthusiasm from industry, policy makers, and social movements and is being increasingly adopted as an imagined solution to sustainability challenges in Sweden. This is reflected for example in the way that the Swedish government sees it as a cornerstone of the sustainable consumption strategy (Ministry of Finance 2016), recently formed the Swedish Circular Economy Delegation (Government Offices of Sweden 2018) and ambitiously stated that “Sweden will develop the resource-effective, circular, bio-based economy” in its latest Government Declaration (authors’ translation, Government Offices of Sweden 2019: 6).

Although initially attracted to CE, particularly in the way it resonated with our previous work on the circulation of material culture, care and repair, and the interconnectedness of humans and things, we realised that our research findings spoke of issues that could not easily

be reconciled with CE thinking. First, it became clear that CE thinking, still in the process of formation, tended to take the perspective of big and established actors, leaving little room for small entrepreneurs. For example, discussions on the importance of being able to track furniture and their parts in order to recycle and reuse them became overshadowed by large corporations' wish to retain control over the entire process to the point of claiming and maintaining ownership over materials and disenfranchising the user from the right to repair.

Second, despite all the talk about the importance of all the different 're'-s, i.e. reduce, reuse, repair and recycle, the dominating discourse of CE prioritises recycling, since this is where the economic interest of the main actors lies, and the economic gains are most easily made (Alexander and Reno 2012; MacBride 2012). 'Reduce' uncomfortably conflicts with growth, while 'reuse' and 'repair' in general are considered too specific and messy for an economy of scale (Crocker and Chiveralls 2018; Isenhour and Berry 2020; Norris 2017). This despite the fact that recycling is burdened by costly and energy consuming infrastructures (Corvellec 2019). Third, and the most important divergence however, was how mainstream CE thinking by being concerned with recycling, tended to prioritize resource efficiency, faster loops, and the dissociation of materials from their users. CE thus becomes more of a conceptual continuation of the modern linear production system – promoting the core values of efficiency, reduction, and detachment that led to an extreme form of planetary resource depletion in the first place – than a break with it. It shares much of its foundation with ecomodernism in its reliance on technological innovation and market capitalism for its operation (Genovese and Pansera 2020: 9).

Many of the professionals we came into contact with, during both ROF and LwT, were well versed in the CE thinking, were often motivated by its core principles, and tended to be relatively uncritical of it. Given that our own research pointed in directions that contradicted or were incompatible with many of the aspects of CE theories, when entering this field, we often sought to recast issues and suggest alternative interpretations. On the one hand, then, our 'unruliness' consisted in critiquing some of the main assumptions and dominant ways of thinking, a well-established mode of academic engagement that will be further described below.

On the other hand, we also went beyond this mode of critique and criticism. As will be shown below, in both projects we collaborated with partners around a series of co-hosted events, as well as co-produced more tangible, physical artefacts – a jointly authored 'furniture guide'; a jointly designed exhibition – that can be likened to the 'fieldwork devices' discussed by anthropologists Adolfo Estalella and Tomás Sánchez Criado (2018: 2). These are creative interventions that "...turn the field into a site for epistemic collaboration" (Estalella and Criado 2018: 2). As they point out, when anthropologists do fieldwork in distinct sites with 'epistemic communities', such as experts, scientists, public servants, or artists, this often leads to collaborative relationships where the counterparts become epistemic partners and involve a distinct ethnographic modality that differs from the traditional trope of participant observation (Ibid 2018).

The main reason why we ventured into such experimental collaboration however, did not come from within anthropology, but from the emerging set of theoretical approaches and methodological tools often labelled under 'posthumanism'. We had become interested in such perspectives because they offered us conceptual tools for thinking about ethics and responsibility that go beyond care for humans to also consider things and non-human

processes, such as, in our case furniture or household belongings (Appelgren 2020; Bohlin 2020). Yet, we also found inspiration in the way that posthumanist approaches explicitly encourage combining critique with constructive and speculative approaches. Political philosopher Jane Bennett for example, discussing the relationship between humans and things, argues that there is a need to move beyond ‘demystification’, a critical mode which aims at exposing, revealing, and denouncing human, often exploitative or oppressing, intentions (2010: xiv). Besides broadening our view to also consider how non-human forces affect our lives, she argues, we need positive formulations of alternatives, since ethical political action “... seems to require not only a vigilant critique of existing institutions but also positive, even utopian alternatives” (2010: xv). In a similar move, philosopher and feminist Rosi Braidotti (2018) argues for an affirmative critique that is both critical and creative. She and other scholars associated with posthumanism and feminism have long emphasised how analysis is performative: how when we describe what we find, “wording”, becomes “worlding”; in other words, we co-produce reality by describing it. For this reason, one way of bringing about the change we wish to see is to “write it”; to put it into words (Åsberg 2012: 15). For us, such arguments gave us theoretical license to step outside of the usual mode of critique associated with academia – a mode we were used to – and engage more creatively and constructively in the “collaboration, sharing and co-thinking” that is emphasised by Nolan (2017: 33) as key characteristics of applied anthropological work. Such a stance also resonates well with recent anthropological work that emphasizes how creative, improvisational, speculative, and participatory techniques may have the potential to significantly contribute to and intervene in contemporary worldmaking activities (Pink and Salazar 2017: 3).

Three ways of being unruly

Recontextualising and reframing

What, then, did being unruly entail, and what did it result in? One illustrative example is from the ROF project. In the beginning of the project, other project members had drawn up a graphic model of how we should divide the work between us, which the project leader showed on a PowerPoint presentation. The focus of the project was what we called ‘bottlenecks’, various kinds of organisational obstacles that we had identified as preventing reuse of office furnishings. In the model, such obstacles were broken down into boxes, each focusing on a constituent part like traceability (of the material that furniture is made of), safety (for example, toxicity of materials, or fire hazards), juridical aspects, or logistics. For each box, aspects such as ‘knowledge’ or ‘information’ would be investigated, for example, how can information about available used furniture in an organization be made more accessible, or how can knowledge about traceability be improved? There was also a box for ‘attitudes’. Unsurprisingly, this was the box that was assigned to the anthropologists – our task was to investigate what role ‘attitudes’ played for decisions on whether to reuse or buy newly produced office furnishings.

We considered this conceptualisation of the project to be problematic for two reasons. First, we had reservations about the idea of treating attitudes as distinct from information and knowledge. Not only are these inseparable we argued, but they are also intertwined with other aspects such as social relations, desires, and emotions – all factors that need to

be considered when understanding how decisions are taken. Second, it made little sense to treat ‘attitudes’ as a distinct phenomenon from, and on par with, the other obstacles, such as legislation or logistics. Surely these would all be related, given that stakeholders would have attitudes in relation to precisely those obstacles – to fire hazards, legislation, or economic incentives?

While this kind of compartmentalization of various “cognitive” aspects had been useful in one phase of conceptualising the project, we argued that it was important to see how everyday decision making was grounded in a range of interrelated aspects. Emphasising the ‘composite’ character of what our collaborators called ‘attitudes’, we argued that decision making processes unfold in entanglements of practices, information, knowledge, desires, emotions, social relations and so on. In other words, our unruliness consisted in questioning the basic conceptualisation of the project; a *recontextualising and reframing* of the issue. In this case, our suggestion led to a revision of the planning document. The separate box of attitudes was removed and was replaced by an understanding that each of the other subthemes – logistics, safety etc. – would need to be investigated in terms of how it depended on knowledge, routines, expectations, norms, desires and so on.

This way of being unruly, through recontextualising issues, also happened on other occasions. One that ended up having a significant impact on the project was when we suggested a shift from focusing on the critical phases of disposing of and acquiring new furniture, to the less noticeable but important phases in between, of ongoing everyday usage and care. This was initially met with some hesitation: why discuss everyday usage and care of chairs and tables when we should talk about facilitating the transition from new purchases into reuse? Yet, by reframing the issue this way new fruitful questions emerged, such as why and how the need to purchase furniture emerges. If purchase is partly related to the ways a piece of furniture has been maintained on an everyday basis, should we not think more about care and repair? In this way the scope of the project broadened to consider more fully how decisions to change furniture can be delayed or avoided. Eventually this led to a concrete proposal of establishing a new profession in public management, such as a furniture consultant or furniture caretaker, who on an everyday basis manages and cares for the furniture and interior of a workplace – a janitor with extended authority to see to “the best interest” of the furniture, safeguarding its wellbeing, assessing its vulnerabilities and capacities and matchmaking it with the needs of the organization. Whether or not this will lead to the creation of such a profession we don’t know, but we included the recommendation in our final project report.

The shift from insisting on interrogating critical phases of discarding and buying new, to assessing the ongoing everyday interaction between people and furniture, was partly a case of the classic anthropological technique of reframing and recontextualizing. By casting the established main question in a different light, new aspects, relations, and associations were made visible and conceptually approachable. We used the Swedish words for reuse, *återbruk*, and use, *bruk*, to illustrate this shift. While *bruk* usually translates to use, it also has connotations to cultivation as in *jordbruk*, farming, or literally “cultivating the soil.” *Bruk* can be understood as the linear gradual erosion of a thing, through use, until it is used up, *förbrukat*, but we emphasized how *bruk* also connotes the responsible and sustainable management of productive resources. However, this reframing did not only come about as a result of a play with words and their deeper meanings. The CE perspective of our

collaborators influenced how they focused on ‘the problem’ of getting persons in decision-making positions to choose reuse, rather than the less sustainable option of new purchases – the whole ‘bottleneck’ issue arose from the aim of getting people to change behaviour in critical phases, i.e. when purchases are being made. They were simply put, primarily concerned with “closing the loops”. Our suggestion of shifting the focus from reuse to the phase of *bruk*, use, was grounded in our critique of CE, which, in turn, was inspired by the posthumanist concern with care in relationships between humans and non-humans, as well by its foregrounding of processes of change and becoming. Thus, while it is often said that the main contribution of anthropology in applied settings is the methodological tools and techniques, this illustrates the important role that theory can play, showing how abstract theoretical insights can provide solutions or understandings in concrete, applied situations (Pink, O’Dell and Fors 2017; Stull and Schensul 2018).

A third example of how we recontextualised issues concerned the matter of safety of reuse. After some meetings and team-labs with other stakeholders, including various professions such as “mainstream” (as opposed to those specialising in reuse) interior designers, architects, janitors, procurement officers etc., we noticed how a common way of framing the decision to buy newly produced furniture instead of reusing was to claim that this decision was based on considerations of health and safety issues. Partly, the argument went, furniture production has overall become safer and much more strictly regulated, and toxic or fire-prone materials, paints or varnish that were commonly used in the past are now forbidden. In contrast, there is often a lack of information about old furniture, and reusing it involves taking risks of exposure to toxins or fire hazards. Yet, in this way of framing the issue the focus was strictly on the user, imagined to be an employee in an office in the Gothenburg region. If we broadened our focus, we argued, and included the phases of *producing* the furniture, considering the places and people involved where this takes place, as well as where the furniture is transported from (e.g. the global South), the overall net effect is not necessarily that the newly produced is less harmful or more healthy, indeed, the opposite may be true. This recontextualisation of the health issues pushed the discussion in new directions, and a representative from the procurement department of the municipality later told us that this discussion had led her to include this broader conceptualization of health issues in a policy document for procurement, aimed at facilitating the buying of reuse products and services.

In the LwT project we used similar techniques of recontextualising and reframing. This project was more firmly framed, as the ultimate goal was to produce a part of a museum exhibition with a set opening date and a relatively strict working plan up to that day. Meetings with museum officials, including an exhibition designer and pedagogical staff, took place over an extended period of two years. The collaboration was thus initiated from two different starting points: the museum’s, with the task of developing and concretizing and overarching exhibition, and ours, which was to contribute with knowledge from our research. The process was one of gradually understanding each other’s positions and possibilities for contributing to the process, and slowly converging in a common conceptual idea. This turned out to be a winding journey, where two different creative approaches met – one more closely tied to the overall conceptual scheme and the concrete task at hand, the other more unbound, unwieldy, and unruly. One reason for the different approaches was the museum staff’s expertise in the field of exhibition design, something we lacked. At

times, when we would offer creative ideas, they put these into perspective by pointing out that they had already been tried before, in a different exhibition, and were therefore not novel enough, or that they were unsuitable for practical reasons, for example wheelchair access demands. Another reason concerned how the overall exhibition concept evolved, and the strict deadlines the museum staff were tied to, while we were freer to pursue ideas on their own merits.³

Yet, once the different temporalities had been aligned, and the blind spots we might have had for each other's work processes identified and addressed, overall this collaboration became creative and fruitful. The techniques of recontextualising and reframing proved particularly useful when trying to develop innovative and thought-provoking ways of illustrating human-thing relationships and the dynamics involved in consumption. For example, whereas the overall exhibition focused on a critique of mass consumption and unsustainable production methods, our partners and we agreed on the need to recontextualise the role of objects by counteracting this negative narrative of mass consumption with one that emphasises our ability to form close relationships with things, something that will be further discussed below. Furthermore, given that this collaboration was designed to be a creative and explorative one – albeit within the given overall goal of producing an exhibition – the format of the process was in itself conducive to precisely such techniques.

Among other things, we tried out prototypes of the exhibition components with focus groups, or test panels. These were immensely valuable events for finding out how potential visitors would understand and react to our ideas. One example was when we had prepared a mockup of what we planned would become a citizen science component, which involved visitors answering questions about certain household belongings that they had kept for a long time. Our aim was to stimulate reflection on why we throw things away, and to recontextualise objects that had remained with us for a very long time, for example in attics or basements, from being regarded as “junk” or “clutter”, to something to be proud of. Yet, because of the way that we had phrased certain questions and also the order they were asked, members in the focus group consisting of adult choir members, reacted in the opposite way. One man expressed shame that he had kept an old broken tennis racket even though he knew it was not good to play with anymore, and a woman said that she felt guilty about all the junk that she never had the time to go through. We had to go back to the drawing board and reframe and recontextualise our questions to ensure that they better reflected what we wanted to communicate.

These joint focus groups are a good example of the kinds of material and social interventions that Estalella and Sánchez Criado argue (2018), transform the field into a site of epistemic collaboration when doing fieldwork with communities of professionals. During these events, our partners and we engaged in joint epistemic explorations, where we together designed the focus groups, and were equally unknowledgeable about what would come out of the activity and how this would affect the next step of our process.

³ See Tinius and Macdonald (2020) for a discussion of the challenges involved in what they term the recursive relational modalities between anthropology, ethnography and curating.

Probing deeper

Another way of being unruly is what we here call *probing deeper*, in other words to go beyond the seemingly obvious by contextualising an issue or simply seeking more information (for a similar argument, see Pink, Morgan and Dainty 2017). One example from the ROF project was when we probed deeper into what the issue of safety involved. We discovered that different administrative units and companies prioritised this issue very differently, even though their activities and business were very similar. One example was a unit that had recently moved offices. During the process of planning the move, the issue of chemicals, particularly airborne ones that could be measured had played a crucial part in discussions and was a topic that according to one of the staff members, had absorbed much time and energy. In contrast, a staff member from a similar unit reported that during their recent move, the question of chemicals had not been prominent at all, but instead discussions about the costs of transports had dominated the process and shaped decisions. Similarly, different units had very different ideas regarding how important the risk of fire hazards is, or to what extent they should consider acoustic concerns. The different evaluation of these and similar factors did not seem to reflect actual differences in needs between the units, but rather a degree of arbitrariness and serendipity in terms of which issues happened to be influential.

We also discovered that issues of toxicity and fire hazards were sometimes used rhetorically to establish buying newly produced furniture as the better and safer alternative. For example, an oft-repeated comment from those hesitant about reuse – for example, those whose profession was heavily invested in structures geared towards buying new furniture – was the risk that children would chew on the furniture, even though the offices in question were not frequented by children. Similarly, another common phrase when wanting to keep reuse furniture at an arm's length was “What happens if this enters a pre-school or a hospital?”. Given that few people willingly wish to harm children, such arguments tended to invoke feelings of uneasiness about the unknown and were efficient ways of miscrediting reuse and defending established routines of buying newly produced furniture. One example came from one of the project workshops when participants were divided into small groups discussing the possibilities of reusing furniture in offices belonging to public administration. In one group, an interior designer said that it was irresponsible to reuse furniture, asking in an agitated voice how we could possibly be sure that tables and chairs in a school did not originate from Chernobyl, full of radiation. Another participant with expertise in reuse went quiet, but later told us that she had felt criticized by the comment. The examples show the importance of not treating toxicity as a demarcated “box”, isolated from attitudes, or to treat “knowledge” as separate from the field of social relations or power struggles. Discussing this helped our collaborators to question the use of certain discursive labels and deconstruct how such labels were used to achieve certain ends.

Another example of probing deeper, which partly was a result of the recontextualization described above, was when we formulated a question for stakeholders to discuss during a team lab: “Why do offices get to be refurbished other than the obvious reasons such as moving, or change of activity, or business?” Until then, we had simply assumed that offices are renewed or changed mainly because of straight forward, functional reasons, not least because of the hard budget reality of many organisations. Yet during the subsequent discussion we realised that the motives for changing office furniture were often far more

complex. Two interior designers spoke of their frustration at managers who did not listen to their advice, the typical scenario being that the manager wanted a large number of flexible workspaces (i.e. desks not assigned to any one individual), despite them explaining that far fewer of these kinds of spaces are usually needed than expected. Sure enough, they said, when they later visited the refurbished office, they would see the flexible workspaces, kitted out with brand new desks, seats and lighting, standing empty and unused. A janitor pointed out that managers often order new ergonomic chairs, adjustable table or double computer screens for their employees, not because the employees actually need them or even ask for them, but because the managers wish to show that they care about their staff. This, he said, was particularly clear when the leadership changed, and a new manager wanted to leave his or her mark. In this way, simply asking a why-question, rather than starting from the notion that one knows what is going on, revealed a range of relevant social dimensions for understanding decisions to renew offices.

Probing deeper in this way also relates to the issue above regarding recontextualizing the critical phase of choosing to reuse before buying new. We realized that if purchases of office chairs, height-adjustable desks, and computer screens were indeed expressions of status, symbols of progress, techniques of conflict management, or acts of acknowledging individual employees, then our idea to shift focus from instances of purchase to everyday use would miss the point. If purchasing was more related to social processes than material needs, then we needed to do yet another reframing exercise. Again, this led us to focus on what happens outside the critical phases of purchases – the phase of ongoing use. This time however, the discussion revolved less around everyday use of furniture and more about how human relations are being cared for and maintained and how this can take other forms than consumption of new office furniture.

In the ROF project, probing deeper often resulted in surprising insights or information given that the project was based on a number of assumptions that were relatively unquestioned, i.e. that toxicity or fire hazards were measurable risks that impact different administrative units in the same way and are therefore treated the same way, or that such units changed their office furnishings for straight forward, functional reasons. The results of such probing were particularly useful for one of the concrete outcomes of the project, a “furniture guide” which was a simple flow chart that we jointly designed in order to facilitate decisions about whether or not particular pieces of furniture would be suitable to reuse (Appelgren et al. 2018). Without being based on knowledge about how stakeholders perceive and frame the topic of reuse or understanding the issues that are relevant to them, such a guide would lack relevance.

Compared with the ROF project, the LwT project was more explorative in its setup, and both our partners and we used “probing deeper” as a kind of unspoken *modus operandi*. Nearly every meeting we had involved trying to move beyond or beneath obvious ways of conceiving and doing things in order to find new, playful, or provocative angles on the exhibition theme. As such it is more difficult to pinpoint precise examples of insights that it yielded, but as a general technique it was of fundamental importance to the project.

Making associative links between domains

The third way of being unruly is a technique familiar from anthropological literature: to make associative links from one domain to another. Well into the ROF project when we had

worked with the techniques discussed above, reframing problems to find new angles and productive perspectives and to probe deeper, beyond the initial layers of appearances, there was something of a turning point in the way that we conceptualised and communicated issues. Basically one of us got the sudden idea to liken office furniture to fellow colleagues, or staff members. This idea came during one of the workshops with stakeholders in the reuse furniture field and was triggered by the notion of “resources”. Immersed in the CE-discourse that permeated many of the PowerPoint presentations and the debates, our thinking had been trained to associate furniture and materials with resources. When the discussions moved on to managing and caring for staff in organizations and at workplaces however, the concept of human resources came to mind providing a linkage between furniture and humans. Similar to the intervention mentioned above about shifting focus from reuse to use, this association was also inspired by posthumanist theory which encourages thinking of parallels and links between humans, animals, plants, things, and materials, rather than of differences and incongruences, as well as how it seeks ways to level the hierarchy often assumed between them.

At a later workshop we included this juxtaposition in a PowerPoint presentation, and from then on the comparison became widely used, both within the project and in our communication with stakeholders. We asked what would happen if the management of a public or private organisation approached furniture and furnishing in the same way as they approached their staff. What would it mean to think of furniture and interiors as kindred non-human resources? If a staff member starts to perform less well than expected, the usual route is not to end that person’s contract but to provide supplementary training, change something in the work environment, or perhaps give him or her different tasks. Firing somebody is seen as a costly and administratively complicated last resort, to be avoided. Could one change attitudes, policies, and regulation to create similar routines when it comes to tired or malfunctioning office furniture? By phrasing the issue this way we opened up the possibility of thinking of pieces of furniture as subjects of the workplace as much as people, having equal rights to be valued, cared for, and nurtured. While far-fetched, the idea was effective in communicating a conceptual shortcut to a rethinking of taken-for-granted perspectives.

In the LwT project, we also played with the posthumanist notion of things not as objects but as subjects and used the technique of drawing associative connections between different domains. This time we played with the parallel between the relationships that humans have with their belongings and those that they have with each other. Together with our project partners, we formulated an idea that the exhibition could encourage visitors to view their relationships to things as they are used to thinking about relations with human beings. Indeed, why not take this one step further to structure this part of the exhibition as a narrative of a long-term love relationship between a human and thing, with phases such as initial romantic attraction, established and stable everyday togetherness, and relationship crises?

This idea proved fruitful and eventually shaped our contribution to the exhibition. The theme of sudden attraction and faded feelings were illustrated by mugs and cups standing on a table. Each had been donated by a member of the public, and when pushing a heart-shaped button next to the mug, the visitor could hear a voice telling the story of how the previous owner had fallen in love with the mug, and how the strong feelings of attraction for various reasons had faded. Then there was another part dedicated to long-term relations

with things, a wall full of objects that we had bought from a second-hand shop and included a screen with the citizen science component. A final section explored broken relationships and mending, for example containing a bowl mended with the Japanese technique of visual repairing, *kintsugi*. Here the visitor could go to the “thing therapist”, a mannequin doll dressed up as a therapist, giving recorded questions and advice modelled on those one expects when in a relationship crisis, such as can the relationship be repaired, or is it time to part ways? By casting relationships to things in this way, the idea was to encourage visitors to think about why they fall in love with stuff, how it is to live with trustworthy and faithful things and what makes us get tired of our belongings and want to get rid of them. The aim was to draw attention to our capacity to form strong bonds with objects and to care for them, as a counterbalance to other parts of the larger exhibition which were explicitly critical of consumption.

Room for unruliness

Reflecting on the different collaborations with non-academic partners that we have undertaken, both as part of *Re:heritage* and in the various applied projects, certain patterns emerge. Put simply, the level of success of a project seems to depend on two interrelated issues: first, whether there are good and trusting relationships between the collaborating partners; and second, whether the anthropologists are given room to be “unruly” (and of course, that partners regard this unruliness as beneficial). The two are intimately connected. As is clear from the above discussion, what is referred to here is not unruliness or disruption in a social sense as in being rude or impertinent, but rather in terms of cognitive strategies and ideas. Even so, to articulate an alternative way of conceptualising something in a meeting, or to insist on abandoning an established typology or way of classifying phenomena, might not work very well unless good relations have been established.

One of the lessons we had learned from previous collaborations, which we brought into the cases discussed here, was the importance of making sure to provide ample opportunities to get to know each other preferably outside of the conventional meeting format. This meant being ready to quickly respond to opportunities that presented themselves; for example, in the case of the ROF project, an invitation to go on a day trip to a town known for its many furniture factories and reuse initiatives. Despite not being sure what the exact purpose of this visit was, we had learned the value of doing something concrete together as a group. Chatting in the rented car trying to find the way, keeping each other company when the train turned out to be many hours late, and visiting a range of reuse initiatives indeed helped to consolidate the group and establish trust. The concrete tasks that needed to be solved along the journey pushed us all to step out from our professional roles and to relate to each other in a more relaxed and informal manner. Similarly, once the project was underway, collectively hosting “team labs” events for invited stakeholders, with all that this entailed in terms of practical planning such as sending out invitations, preparing coffee and snacks, getting stationary, and cleaning up afterwards, further strengthened relationships in the group and created good conditions for productive forms of unruliness.

Finally, a note on the conditions for such collaboration to be successful. In the cases discussed here, we were fortunate that two funding agencies supported our projects, meaning that our and our collaborators’ labour was paid for and we had the time to build solid relationships. Had this not been the case, and we had lacked the possibility of laying the groundwork for these relationships, it is possible that the same unruly interventions

that proved successful here would have been received very differently and our input into the processes might have been more limited.

Conclusion

When we began our initial research project *Re:heritage*, the field of reuse and second-hand was dominated by debates on structures, regulations, policies, and big actors that were often disconnected from the experiences and perspectives of ordinary people and everyday social life. Discussions on recycling and CE seemed to miss what was so clearly visible in our fieldwork: how ordinary household belongings are used to express identities, negotiate social relationships, and form an intrinsic but often unacknowledged part of people's lives. In our experience, CE thinking tends to disregard the inherently complex layers of material, historical, cultural, and social values and meanings of things in order to isolate and exploit their material resource value in new production cycles. This reductive process is in itself wasteful as important socio-cultural qualities of the thing are neglected and lost (Appelgren 2019a). In addition, CE thinking encourages further dissociation of materials and things from humans. By giving the control of the resources of production to corporations, even during the consumption phase casting consumers as users rather than owners and providing a function rather than a commodity, people are set apart from things. Ultimately their engagement in things becomes watered down, as practices for reinforcing relationships to things, such as ownership, care, and repair are undermined by corporate control.

In contrast, in both the applied projects discussed here we sought to engage in a critique of wasteful and unsustainable practices that was combined with a more nuanced understanding of the multifaceted and complex role of objects in people's lives, whether in private homes or in offices. Here we were able to draw on posthuman insights that stresses relationality, coexistence, and material vitality and on insights from critical heritage studies that acknowledge the layers of significance of things to be actively valued and cared for (Appelgren and Bohlin 2015, 2017). Instead of further dissociation of humans from things and from the material implications of life, a sustainable economy needs to stress interconnectedness and interdependence as well as the importance of staying in vital relationships even when they cause troubles and inconveniences (Haraway 2016).

These insights inspired our involvement in both projects. In the ROF project, it meant that whenever we could, we tried to counteract the large-scale, abstract concepts and logic of CE language that we often encountered with attention to actual, situated human-thing relations, highlighting how social, cultural, and material processes come together. In the museum project, LwT, these ideas inspired us to steer away from the initial focus on reuse and circulation as a solution, instead concentrating on *not* sending things into circulation, but rather to keep them for as long as possible. The process was different in each project, with a clearer division and separation of labour in the ROF project, which meant a greater freedom for us to conduct *our* part, and a stricter and more structured format in LwT, but where we, to a larger extent than in the former, shared an explorative and creative approach with our partners. In both projects, however, we often experienced that we were "unruly" in the sense of asking questions or coming with suggestions that were clearly not expected, and that sometimes threw the process in entirely new directions.

Going back to the issue of what a problem is, the etymological origin of the word highlights that a problem is far from a gap or an empty void that can simply be filled

with a solution. In contrast, it is something thrown before us; it has substance, much like an obstacle on the ground in front of us, bringing our onward movement to a halt. If we understand problems as things thrown in particular times and spaces, the techniques that have been discussed above – probing deeper into issues, recontextualising them, and drawing unexpected associations between separate domains – may create new understandings of the ‘then’ and ‘there’ of a particular issue. Rather than removing the obstacle as quickly as possible, the task of the anthropologist is to throw it differently, and to harness the possibilities and energies emerging from the different notions of “then” and “there” that may thus become accessible.

The particular benefit of bringing in an anthropologist in an applied project, then, is not so much to get the problem solved, as to have the problem thrown differently before the stakeholders in order to engender reflection and consideration. The challenge for the anthropologist is to stay with the issue broadly defined, but not be limited by a preconceived or premature framing of the problem. When we ask what happens if office furniture is seen as valuable by staff and fellow colleagues, or when thing-relationships are modelled on human romantic love, we put anthropology to work by engaging in the kind of speculative acts Tim Ingold identifies as central to the discipline (2017). These are occasions for exploring possibilities – other ways of being and other worlds – that may contribute to the articulation of new and unexpected alternatives and solutions.

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