

RESEARCH

'It will Keep Circulating': Loving and Letting Go of Things in Swedish Second-hand Markets

Anna Bohlin

Using the case of Sweden, this article examines the growing sector of reuse and second-hand activities from the perspective of how people express and practice their relationships to objects that they acquire from second-hand markets. Drawing on anthropological fieldwork in flea markets, second-hand shops, homes and recycling depots, it explores how people relate to and handle goods which, instead of becoming waste, enter new life cycles through reuse. It suggests that buying, using and passing on certain kinds of second-hand things involves particular forms of affection and 'serial' care for the objects as things-in-motion. At the same time, part of the attraction of these objects is how they enable the practising of a particular kind of subjectivity: that of an informed, moral and caring consumer. Part of such reuse subjectivity is the capacity to form close bonds with, and care for objects, but also to untie these bonds in order to carefully and responsibly let go of them. The article suggests that paying attention to the affective orientation and disposition that form part of such consumer subjectivity may provide keys to understanding what drives second-hand consumption and the accelerated circulation of goods it may entail. Offering an opportunity to examine assumptions of reuse and circulation as inherently 'sustainable', it also provides perspectives on practices of care.

Keywords: second-hand; reuse; care; sustainability; consumerism; divestment; circulation

Introduction

In the last few decades, the consumerist ideology that has long privileged disposable products and newness has become increasingly challenged by ideas and practices that proclaim the benefits of more responsible and less environmentally harmful kinds of consumption. One such alternative form of consumption that has become increasingly widespread is the trade in reused goods in various second-hand, retro and vintage markets (Appelgren & Bohlin 2015; Baker 2012; Balthazar 2016; Clarke 2010; Gregson & Crewe 2003; Knowles 2015). In Sweden, internationally known for its leading role in sustainability practices and politics (Isenhour 2010), the reuse and trading of used goods is increasingly seen as an important avenue for reducing waste and saving resources. In a recent position paper, the Swedish government stated that '[r]eusing goods instead of buying new ones contributes to a more sustainable lifestyle and leads to major benefits for the environment', and is important in order to 'facilitate the development of a circular economy' (Finansdepartementet 2016: 6).

Whether and how various forms of reuse actually reduce waste, and contribute to social or environmental sustainability is a topic too vast to consider here (but see e.g. Alexander & Reno 2012; Hawkins 2006; Lane &

Watson 2012; Norris 2012). Rather, using a Swedish case study, this article focuses on the consumer end of such practices, exploring how norms regarding the virtue of reuse intersect with how people relate to and handle things that they acquire from second-hand markets. More precisely, it focuses on attitudes and practices related to a range of second-hand activities, ranging from acquisition of pre-owned objects from flea markets, charity- and vintage shops, including online second-hand markets, to living with and keeping such objects in the home, to passing them on to others through various reuse channels. Bringing together insights from anthropological fieldwork in locations related to these different practices, this article explores the how people express and perform their relationships to objects that have avoided becoming waste, instead beginning new life cycles with new owners. It suggests that buying, using and passing on second-hand things involves a particular form of dispersed, or 'serial' care for the objects as things-in-motion (Appadurai 1986), which will be outlined below. At the same time, such practices allow possibilities for enterprising the self-as-reuser, to paraphrase waste scholar Gay Hawkin's notion of 'self as recycler', in other words they help produce a particular kind of person that enjoys the status of being responsible and ethically conscious (2006: 95; see also Alexander & Reno 2012: 2). A significant part of such reuse subjectivity seems to be the capacity to form close bonds with, and care for objects, but also to carefully and responsibly let

go of them, in order to replace them with new purchases, often from second-hand markets. The article aims to provide insights into the affective orientation and disposition that forms part of such consumer subjectivity, since this may provide keys to understanding what drives the accelerated circulation of goods that it entails.

Theoretically, the paper brings together insights from previous work on consumption and material culture (e.g. McCracken 1986; Miller, 2008, 2012); second-hand practices (e.g. Baker 2012; Balthazar 2016; Gregson & Crewe 2003; Herrmann 1997, 2011 & 2015; Holland 2018) and on processes of divestment (Gregson 2007, Gregson, Metcalfe & Crewe 2007; Hetherington 2004; Lovatt 2015; Roster 2001). Building on these perspectives, it explores the specific qualities that processes of acquisition and divestment of things take on when set against the strong social norms regarding the virtue of recycling and reuse that characterize contemporary Sweden. The article is also a response to the recent call by anthropologist Richard Wilk, who noted that there is a surprising lack of anthropological research on what motivates people in their movement through daily life in consumer society. Knowledge is needed in order to reframe ideas of what constitute wealth and poverty in more effective terms and that are not based on types of consumption that uses large amount of energy and physical resources (2016: 308–9).

The article is based on based on anthropological fieldwork, conducted intermittently between 2015 and 2018, in three different types of locations in a Swedish major city: second-hand markets (retro-, vintage and charity shops, flea markets); in people's homes; and at drop-off points for used goods (in a charity shop, and at a municipal recycling station, see below).¹

Regarding terminology, the category of objects considered in this paper is purposefully not strictly delineated, and includes the usual range of items found in second-hand shops (trinkets, household objects, furniture, clothes, etc). In Sweden, 'second-hand' (the English term), or *loppisfynd* (flea market finds) are the two most commonly used shorthand terms for such goods. They are also used to described things bought on online second-hand markets, as well as from more specialized vintage or retro boutiques, although for these, 'vintage' and 'retro' are sometimes used as well. The use of 'second-hand' in this article follows how interviewees used the term.

Loving and Embedding Things With History

Walking through a mega flea market, arranged every summer in the city, I came across a make-shift 'booth' consisting of a piece of cloth on the ground, strewn with items such as household objects, bric-a-brac, old toys, clothes and jewelry (Figure 1). As I passed, a man in his late forties, who had just bought a hand puppet in the shape of a cat from this booth, was playing around, saying 'meow' and pretending that the cat greeted people who were passing (Figure 2). Just when he was about to leave with the puppet, the young man who had sold it to him called out 'Wait!', stretched his arm out and quickly patted the cat's head in a farewell gesture. He then said 'There

we go!', and the man walked on with his new find. Curious, I asked the young man why he had patted the cat, and he replied: 'Of course I needed to say goodbye. That cat has always been with me!'

This episode shows something that I soon became used to when researching people's relations to their second-hand objects, namely the common practice of not just acknowledging, but foregrounding and drawing attention to one's affection for, and relation to the thing. Witnessing transactions at flea markets, I frequently observed sellers use language or action that displayed their strong positive feelings towards the objects, sometimes accompanied by stories, illustrating how much they had meant to the previous owners. The buyers would listen respectfully and often engage in banter about how they were planning to use and take care of the items. Anthropologist Gretchen Herrmann noted similar practices in North American garage sales, suggesting that such sales are '...awash with human emotion; they feature used personal belongings suffused with identities, histories, stories, and memories that are moved along with affect' (2015: 170). She discusses how the primary motivation for holding such sales is to make sure that one's sentiment-laden object go to a good home, and shows the significance of these rites of passage for the seller, in which affect is transferred along with the object (Herrmann 2011 and 2015: 170).

Significantly, when I visited people in their homes in order to interview them about their second-hand objects, the emphasis on strong positive feelings towards them were just as common. While far from all second-hand items were regarded with the same affection (some had been bought for more pragmatic reasons) I was surprised by the range of things that people would bring out and talk about, using language that conveyed intense affection and even love (cf. Holland 2018: 11). Examples included a cupboard, a bed, a sofa, a tin vase, a cup, a plastic jar, a black coat, a rug, a statuette, a figurine lamp, a tiny brass box, and a table. At times affection was articulated in an almost animist language, where the owner spoke about, and cared for the thing as if it was somehow alive. Often contrasted with anonymous, mass-produced first cycle items (despite sometimes actually having been mass-produced before they ended up in second-hand markets, cf. Balthazar 2016: 458) these objects were appreciated for their uniqueness, character, or 'soul', accessible through sensory details such as physical traces and marks, or through stories about their previous lives or owners (Bohlin 2016).² Piecing together bits of information from the seller or from traces on the object, such as labels, or physical traces of aging; the feel of scratched surfaces or the weight of solid wood, they created stories and fantasies about their objects' past (Appelgren & Bohlin; Balthazar 2016; Gregson & Crewe 2003; Holland 2018). Although lack of space precludes a fuller discussion, it is also noteworthy that their history as already used encouraged further usage, and allowed for a relaxed attitude towards everyday wear and tear in a way that pristine, newly bought goods typically would not.

Several people explained that compared with for example heirlooms, not knowing the precise origins or



Figure 1: Makeshift 'booth' at a mega flea market. Photo: author.



Figure 2: Man playing with a cat puppet bought at flea market. Photo: author.

histories behind an object could in fact be an advantage that triggered imagination (cf. Gregson & Crewe 2003: 151). 'Then it's almost more interesting, because then one can... then one hasn't got a clue what happened, so then it could be anything', said a woman in her thirties, a civil servant. She described how she took great pleasure from imagining where her sofa had been, who had made it and who had come into contact with it. Another woman showed me how pencil scribbles on the back of a drawer in an old chest looked as if they had been made by children, practicing writing their names. She imagined the children lying on their stomachs on the floor, scribbling, perhaps being told off by a parent. Such traces made her experience a profound connection with previous generations, while feeling happy that she was taking care of that which already exists:

I get very stressed that one just keeps buying stuff all the time, I mean in society at large. And, eh, then it feels good, it kind of feels good in my body, to buy things that already exist, somehow. That one takes care of that which already exists... on...on earth. I mean, it feels better in my own soul [laughing], to keep it in my home. When you walk around, there is a sort of...you are part of history, somehow. Perhaps it sounds a bit dopey, but it kind of feels, it feels...it feels good in my body.

In a third example, a woman actively used the history and social embeddedness of the object when embedding her purchase in her own life.

Helen (fictive name), in her late forties, working in the service industry, loves shopping second-hand. Nearly all her clothes are from second-hand boutiques or online markets, and she always dresses stylishly. On this occasion she was in a particularly good mood, and told me how she had recently bought two chairs from *Blocket* (online second-hand market). Pleased with her purchase, she told me how she had emailed the man who sold them, attaching a photo of the chairs in their new home, writing that she wanted to show him 'how nice it has become with [your] grandpa's chairs' (this and the following excerpts are translated from the email conversation which she later forwarded to me). The seller, an elderly man, had reciprocated with a photo of himself as a child in the 1950s, playing with a tin cable car next to one of the armchairs in his grandparents' home, writing that he enjoyed seeing 'how nice the chairs had got it'. Helen, in turn, replied 'What a lovely picture! Great to see the chairs when they were young and cool cable car!' She told me how she was excited about these interactions, and that the old photograph in particular made the chairs even more special to her. She also mentioned that this kind of exchange was nothing unusual; she often sent an email to the seller, sometimes attaching photos. The narrative about the history of the chairs, unfolding in the exchanges with the previous owner, became an integral part of what they meant to her, just as she documented and communicated the current stage in their biography.

Common to these examples is that the sociality of the objects formed an important part of their attraction. Scholars have drawn attention to how the very same quality of sociality may, in other contexts, be regarded as troubling, or even repulsive. Anthropologist Sasha Newell has written about the increasing number of personal belongings kept out of sight in storage facilities in the US, a trend which is beginning to take hold in Sweden too (2014). These possessions, he argues, contain '...traces of personhood so intimate that their owners find them hard to face directly, and so excise them from their surroundings but not from their minds.' Newell makes a persuasive argument that these types of relations to things, where thing and owner are not clearly separated—most clearly shown in the pathologization of hoarders, cf. Kilroy-Marac 2016—are stigmatized and regarded as improper since they involve a magical mode of thinking that has no place in North Atlantic cosmology.

Extending Newell's insight, it is possible to understand the fascination with second-hand things in the examples above as partly being about the lure of traces of other peoples' personhood. The indexicality of the traces (in a Peircean sense, see Reno 2014), which so powerfully connects people to their possessions in Newell's analysis, is, in the case of second-hand objects, referring not to one's own life, but to that of other people. The potentially threatening capacity of objects to exert a socially troubling hold over one has been stripped away through the commodifying process of being sold on a market (at least ideally, but see Lastovicka & Fernandez 2005 and Gregson & Crewe 2003: 144 who discuss divestment rituals aimed at removing excessive traces of previous owners). Yet, the thing retains just enough potentially indexical relations to a lived life to trigger fantasies, evoke sensations and engender emotion and affect. To this extent, it is a hybrid object, combining elements of the gift, in a Maussian sense, with those of the commodity. The traces of personhood, or sociality, remaining in the object, contribute to the affective 'stickiness' that tie thing and person together (Appelgren & Bohlin 2015; Herrman 1997). As will be discussed further below, however, while the norms surrounding social obligations with respect to gifting tend to be well-established and relatively clear-cut, the norms surrounding second-hand objects and their sociability tend to be more fuzzy.

Letting Go

Given that people so actively embedded their second-hand objects in their lives, through collecting and exchanging information about their history, telling stories about them or simply fantasizing about their prior life, did this mean that they also kept the things for a long time, like the cat puppet that 'had always' been with the young man who sold it? In the early stages of my fieldwork, I simply assumed that this was the case. This assumption turned out to be somewhat premature, however.

Two years after our initial interview, I again met up with Helen. Despite the joy that she had displayed when speaking about the chairs during our previous meeting, and the

almost animist language with which she described how they seemed happy in their new home, she casually told me that she had gotten rid of both. One she had given to her stepdaughter, whereas the other was driven to the recycling depot where it was placed in the container for reuse. The reason was that they were pretty, but not very practical, and she had replaced them with a second-hand sofa where both she, her partner and their teenage daughter could fit.

My surprise was not so much that Helen no longer had the chairs (after all, two years is not a particularly short time). Rather, I was taken aback by the way she spoke about the divestment so off-handedly, not least since she knew that I had taken an interest in the story about them earlier. Trying not to show my surprise, I delicately asked whether she did not in any way feel that she had let the previous owner down (for example by separating the pair). She said: 'Oh no, not at all. That's the way these things work.' She then commented:

Because I buy second-hand, and don't throw anything away, I often think, oh well, but it will keep circulating. Nothing is thrown away. I think, 'well, then it will have to be dropped off at the recycling depot.' There is a lot of circulation going on at my place, both inside my wardrobe, and in how we keep our home.

Helen's words were interesting. What she actually felt for the chairs, I have no way of knowing, but for whatever reason she had initially spoken about them in a language in which strong affection and personal relationships were foregrounded. Describing how she had let them go, however, she obviously did not perceive the need to address the fact that she now portrayed these relationships rather differently, as being of little consequence. From her point of view, the transaction that accorded her chairs gave her *access* to them as singularized items, as having unique identities shaped by their history (Kopytoff 1986), but, apparently, not the *responsibility* for tending to the continued integrity of this particular biography, the way that, perhaps, an heirloom would come with certain obligations. Rather, she perceived her primary obligation to be towards the things themselves; to make sure that they were not thrown away, but kept circulating.

The example shows that the issue of obligations with respect to second-hand items is not clear-cut. As mentioned above, norms around gifting, prescribing obligations of reciprocity, are well established and rarely contested, e.g. discarding a gift that has just been received is generally frowned upon and would be done discretely.³ When it comes to second-hand items, there is no comparable consensus regarding to what extent it comes with obligations to previous owners or users. While I reacted with surprise at how Helen had discarded the chairs, she simply said that 'this is how it works', implying that she regarded this as part of the rules of the game. In other words, having been sold on a market, the chairs had become commoditized enough for any remaining bonds to the previous

owner to be cancelled. The ambiguity regarding the precise boundaries of this sociality—which Helen could foreground and downplay, depending on context, and which she and I seemed to perceive slightly differently—can be compared to Herrman's observation of American garage sales. She argues that they allow for the construction of exchanges along the commodity-gift continuum according to the perceptions of the transactors. In other words, there is an instability in the how the exchange is understood and construed, as primarily commercial, or socially engaged and gift-like (1997: 917, cf. Balthazar 2016). Even though Swedish second-hand markets (shops in particular) are more similar to regular commercial markets than the face-to-face sales of garage sales or flea markets, they entail a similar ambiguity that actors can use to their advantage.

Besides illustrating the fuzziness of the sociality of second-hand objects, the fate of Helen's two chairs also highlighted two themes that repeatedly came up during fieldwork: the moral virtue attached to keeping things circulating, and the importance of not throwing away functioning objects. The next section explores these themes in the light of how people articulated and engaged in divestment practices when donating their used goods to second-hand markets.

Passing On

During the autumn of 2017 I conducted participant observation and interviewed people as they arrived to donate goods in two locations. The first was a large charity shop, run by a church and the local municipality, which raises funds for both local and international social and aid work, and the second a municipal recycling station where four different non-profit organisations had placed containers for donations (**Figure 3**).⁴ I had anticipated that people might feel uneasy about the fact that they were getting rid of things, and initially took care to stay in the background, and not ask too directly about that which was being donated. Yet, it soon became clear that people were very happy about to engage in conversation, letting me help them carry things from cars, open boxes, and pick things up for me to see (see Hebrok 2016: 9 for a similar experience at a Norwegian recycling station).⁵ In fact, I quickly realized, I encountered people at moments when they felt very good about themselves and their actions, for a number of reasons.

First, most of the affective labour of disentangling from these objects had already taken place before they reached the drop-off stations. By the time they arrived, their owners typically talked about their belongings in terms of classes of items that they were getting rid of ('kitchen stuff', 'some books'), rather than mentioning any individual items. Many described how their belongings had gone through what geographer Kevin Hetherington has referred to as a two stage 'burial', where the items were left in bags or boxes for a few weeks or months, in attics, basements, or in the hallway, while their value, and how it is to be translated and moved on had to be addressed



Figure 3: Drop-off point for donations at a municipal recycling station. Photo: author.

before they were ready to be removed to the representational outside (2004: 169, cf. McCracken 1986).

Second, while any remaining nostalgic or emotional attachments were likely to have been minimized by this treatment, at this stage in the process, the most dominant feeling, conveyed in tone of voice and body language, seemed to be that of relief. Many people glowed with satisfaction at ridding themselves of the bags and boxes, and described how they felt energized and light-hearted. With one or two exceptions, those donating things said that they were doing it because they had done a 'clean out' (*rensning*). Periodic housecleaning is not a new phenomenon, but in the last few years has been elevated to a new status in Sweden, as in other countries affected by trends of minimalistic or simple living. The same year a bestselling book popularized a term for this phenomenon through its title: *Prylbanta* ('Go on a thing diet', Byström & Ernfors 2017). As anthropologist Katie Kilroy-Marac argues of the US context, such trends, marked by the conspicuous absence of clutter—a nearly inescapable feature of consumption—work as markers of status, class and virtue, since it takes time, energy and resources to keep well-ordered domestic spaces (2016: 446). The relief people described when donating their bags of things, therefore, is likely to reflect not simply the physical comfort of getting rid of unwanted stuff, and creating space in cupboards and attics, but also being able to live up to the virtuous ideal of a self-regulating and self-disciplining home-owner, resisting and controlling the world of clutter, a moral discourse Kilroy-Marac noted in her work with professional organizers (cf. Ambjörnsson 2018).

A third reason for feeling good was tied to notions of 'doing the right thing'. When asked why they had chosen to donate their things, rather than throwing them away, or selling them, nearly every person said that they believed it was good for the environment, and that it would be wasteful and wrong to throw away things that other people could use. One man, a teacher in his forties, spoke about the physical discomfort he experienced whenever he watched people throw furniture away, hearing it crash and break against the bottom of the containers. In contrast,

passing things along to somebody else, who could keep using them, was repeatedly described as a source of profound satisfaction. In some cases, donating had not been the first option, but seemed an acceptable option after attempts to sell it had failed. Others said that it was too much effort to sell things in relation to the relatively small sums of money one could get, but that throwing them away would be unacceptable.

Besides making sure unwanted objects were passed on in socially and environmentally sustainable ways, and avoiding throwing things away, some of the interviewees also said that they were generally trying to change their lifestyle, wishing to consume less and keep fewer things in their homes. Again, they cited environmental reasons for this, and a number of people used the same word, saying that it is simply 'unnecessary' to have so much stuff. Some said that they had become increasingly aware of the environmental costs to consumption in the last few years, one man explaining that it was 'everywhere in the news,' that 'we are consuming too much', and that it is 'bad for the environment'. Two women in their eighties said they had changed their lifestyle in the last five years or so, because they wanted to live more sustainably. Some of the older interviewees also noted that this went well with other reasons for down-sizing, such as avoiding to burden relatives with the task of dealing with their belongings if they would move into care, or after they passed away (see Lovatt 2015).

In other words, interviewees explicitly connected their second-hand and divestment practices with broader moral and ethical issues, pertaining to the virtues of home-keeping, but also to environmental sustainability. To dispose of objects through reuse channels was regarded as a means towards uncluttered domestic spaces, as well as towards more sustainable and responsible lifestyles that would lessen the impact on the earth's resources. At the same time, such practices also enabled the enacting of a particular kind of subjectivity: that of an informed, moral and caring consumer. As such, they testify to the productive and significant role of divestment practices in the construction of social relations and identities (see Gregson

2007; Gregson, Metcalfe & Crewe, 2007; Machado-Borges 2017), an issue that will be further developed below.

Coming Full Circle

One of the questions I asked people was whether they believed they were likely to replace that which they had just donated. I was curious whether they conceived the divesting as an opportunity to bring new things into their homes: were the drop-off stations consciously perceived as off-loading zones that would enable new consumption? In one case, the answer was affirmative. A man in his fifties arrived at the second-hand shop to donate large amounts of clothes that had belonged to him and his wife. He said the clothes were in good condition, but that at this stage in their lives, unlike previously, when they had less money, he and his wife could afford buying new clothes in order to replace them with new, something they did to get a sense of renewal.

Mostly, however, the answer to my question was a heart-felt 'definitely not'. The affective intensity of these answers indicated that perhaps they primarily reflected a state of relief and resolution after the often emotionally and physically hard labour of cleaning out, sorting, packing and carrying things. After all, this was probably the moment when people were the least inclined to consider new purchases. I rephrased the question and probed more carefully whether they believed their cupboards and shelves would remain as spacious and empty as they now were, or whether they might fill up again at some point in the future.

Significantly, many mentioned that the most likely way that things would find their way into their homes again (besides as gifts on birthdays, Christmas etc.) would be from second-hand markets. Some were adamant that they would refrain from buying new things in 'ordinary' shops, but were likely to buy things from second-hand markets, partly because it was easier to buy something on impulse there. Most mentioned affordability as a significant factor, but many interviewees also said that they simply enjoyed browsing around flea markets and second-hand shops, and were likely to come home with something small, such as a cup, a new table cloth, or some glass objects, in order to get a sense of change in the home (cf. Gregson & Crewe, 2003: 94). Several also mentioned more ideological reasons, regarding buying and donating things to second-hand markets as part of a general circulation that they believed was good, particularly for the environment.

In some instances, people drew attention to the fact that they were donating specific items to the very same second-hand shop that they had once bought them from. One man in his sixties donated an ornate traditional wooden chair that he had bought in the same second-hand shop, but decided he no longer had space for. Laughing, he said that the chair had now come full circle. Indeed, references to circularity were common, both in terms of the limited loops between the second-hand shop and one's home, and in terms of broader notions of things circulating in society, passing from hand to hand. Likely influenced by Swedish public discourse—not least official—that in recent years have proclaimed the benefits of the, supposedly,

emerging 'circular economy', such popular notions of circularity have considerable implications for the study of second-hand consumption. If the stages of consumption (acquiring, living with, and disposing of second-hand goods) are investigated in isolation, one misses the sense in which people perceive pre-used goods as being on trajectories, and the extent to which motivation and desires at each of these stages is shaped by this consideration. In the case of second-hand consumption, then, the different phases are not just interlinked, but are typically *seen* as such by those involved.

To illustrate this, we can go back to the case of Helen. Perhaps her attraction to the chairs was not so much oriented towards them as singularized, non-replaceable items, which was how I initially read the exchange of the emails and the photos. Perhaps it was also, or even more, oriented towards them as *generic* singularized items, as things-in-motion, set on a journey (Appadurai 1986). As such, they allowed her to construe herself as somebody with the knowledge and sensibilities needed for appreciating the chairs' trajectories and their broader significance from an ethical and environmental perspective, without necessarily wanting to hold on to them. On the contrary, to effortlessly and responsibly let go of them, passing them on to others, and replacing them with new second-hand finds, displays a kind of consumer dexterity that fits well with key ideas around sharing and flexibility in the 'circular economy' discourse.

Discussion: Caring Deeply But Serially

The observations above are of people who, in different ways, interact with second-hand markets in the role of shoppers, sellers or donors. Even though examples are drawn from very different contexts and moments in people's lives, they point to the existence of certain norms and ideas that recur across these contexts. One emerging theme concerns the general belief in the goodness of keeping things in circulation. Regardless of whether acquiring or discarding objects, there is a widespread notion that passing things on, and extending their lives, is a good thing, while destroying them or throwing them away, is bad. For many people, active in these circles, the benefit of circulating things is a self-evident truth. When probed further, most would cite affordability and environmental aspects, such as saving resources, reducing waste, and bringing consumption levels down, or providing goods to those who need it. Second-hand shopping in other words perfectly combines what Miller has referred to as the *morality* of thrift and concern for the household with the *ethics* of caring for broader issues affecting humanity, two values that often clash (2012: 88; cf. Isenhour 2012).

One aspect of the emphasis on circulation as inherently good is that it allows for, and elevates to a virtuous activity, the continuous replacement of goods in the home, as we saw in some of the examples. Getting rid of something is not simply a divestment practice, but also becomes a generous act of care when the thing is donated to a second-hand market, just as buying something from a charity shop supports a good cause. Second-hand consumption thus offers great opportunities for immediate gratification

and the kinds of fleeting attachments to possessions that sociologist Zygmund Bauman has described as central to consumerism (2004, 2007). Given the ease with which second-hand things can be acquired and discarded responsibly, they are well suited for transitory and short-lived forms of consumption that, according to Bauman, go hand in hand with the ambivalence of contemporary identity concerns (2004: 29). Speaking to Helen, for example, it was clear that second-hand things were continuously brought into her home, and just as swiftly leaving it, by being sold or donated. She did this, she said, not because she really needed to, but because she loved finding new interesting items of clothing, or the challenge of changing and redecorating a room. Similarly, many of those disposing things at the drop-off stations said that they were very likely to bring home new second-hand finds in the near future, not so much to replace things they had just gotten rid of, but to get a sense of renewal and change.

Yet, examples from my fieldwork showed that people related to the things circulating on second-hand markets in ways that differ fundamentally from how Bauman describes consumer goods. According to him, consumer goods '...are meant to be used up and to disappear; the idea of temporariness and transitoriness is intrinsic to their very denomination as objects of consumption; consumer goods have *memento mori* written all over them, even if with an invisible ink' (2004: 29). Furthermore, the 'consumerist syndrome' 'has 'degraded duration and elevated transience' (2007: 85). In the activities discussed above, in contrast, durability and longevity of things was something that most people actively were trying to ensure in different ways, through buying pre-owned things, or through passing on theirs to others. In fact, for many people the duration of goods was elevated to an overriding moral concern, partly in response to precisely the perceived wastefulness of consumerism. In this regard, reuse practices entail a critique of one of the central components of liberal capitalist consumerism: the ideal of newness; that a valuable, desirable object necessarily is one that is bought new and unused. Another ideal that is upturned is that of commodities as anonymous, and stripped of any traces of sociality, with the associated exclusive right to them both in terms of usage and divestment.

Most importantly, whereas consumerism is often seen to imply forms of non-caring about objects or stuff, e.g. the case of bargain shopping at 'pound stores' in the UK discussed by Alison Hulme (2015: 89), the consumption in focus in my fieldwork was suffused with expressions and practices of care. These involved all three dimensions associated with care described by Maria Puig de la Bellacasa (2012): an embodied and affective state, an ethical obligation, and a practical labour (in van Dooren 2014: 291). Significantly, while many of the objects discussed above may remain with their owners or users for a long time—a question beyond the scope of this study—we also saw how there is not necessarily a contradiction between appreciating and caring intensely for a thing, and passing it on to others when one needs a sense of renewal. As long as the divestment happens through channels that ensure the continued circulation of the thing, passing it on can be seen as

a gesture of further caring. What matters is that the thing is not destroyed and ending up as rubbish, but used as long as it can still be appreciated. In other words, by dispersing the care for objects across a series of imagined owners, the concern with the longevity of objects can be combined with benefits of transience for the individual owner.

Expressing affection, love, and 'serial care' towards second-hand things, and disposing of them through reuse channels, can, as mentioned above, also be understood as being part of the enactment of a particular kind of moral and informed subjectivity. Previous studies of second-hand practices have emphasized the role of the 'clever consumer', who can draw on and display the cultural capital associated with being able to distinguish between an interesting bargain and trash, differentiating themselves from those who cannot (Gregson & Crewe 2003: 11; Fischer 2015: 49; Knowles 2016: 78). Another register of subjectivity emerging from the discussion above concerns the ways that second-hand activities help constitute people as caring and responsible moral persons, up to speed with environmentalist discourses on the need to reduce waste and save resources. This subjectivity of 'self-as-reuser' brings to the fore the same ethical and moral dimensions as the 'self-as-recycler' (Alexander & Reno 2012: 2; Hawkins 2006: 95), but involves other aspects pertaining to the fact that it hinges on circulation of pre-used things with histories, rather than materials (e.g. the role of knowledge mentioned above; a sense of responsibility towards the physical integrity and longevity of goods; and, typically, a sensitivity to their sociality. See Isenhour 2012 for a discussion of class-based aspects of ethically motivated reuse).

On one level, engaging in second-hand practices thus fits well with neoliberal notions of self-as-project in which the self becomes the object of careful crafting and molding; a form of branding of the self. However, the practices discussed above clearly entail care, not merely for the crafting of the self-as-reuser, but also for the actual things, beyond their representative or symbolic role for one's own identity. Key to Helen, but also to nearly all interlocutors, was a profound antipathy towards the idea of destroying or throwing away something that could still be used, and she and others took steps to minimize such occurrences. In this sense reuse practices buttress and form part of, but *go beyond* a neoliberal project of identity building, since their effect is to extend care not just to the individual subject, but also to physical objects.

Furthermore, as Hawkins has argued in relation to recycling, to dismiss second-hand practices as tokenism, or 'just another opportunity for the righteous middle class to bleat on about how good they are', implies a problematic framing of the political as opposed to the personal, and as restricted to macro-level entities such as states or capitalism (2006: 6–7). Rather, we need to understand how such ordinary practices, in which bodies are brought into relation with things and materials, may engender feelings, affect and sensibilities that provide the motivational energy to 'move selves from the endorsement of ethical principles to the actual practice of ethical behaviors' (Bennet 2010: xiii). As Kim Knowles has argued,

studying vintage means exploring and questioning our responsibility and ethical positions towards the material world (2015: 79). The attention to things—their physical qualities, potentially indexical signs of previous lives and contexts, and imagined past and future trajectories—common in second-hand practices shows how ordinary people, in their everyday lives, may already be attuned to the 'lively powers of material formations' that proponents of vibrant materialism are calling for (Bennet: vii; cf. Kilroy-Marac 2016).

Conclusion

The discussion above has explored how people expressed and carried out their relationships to things acquired from second-hand markets, and how they tended to foreground strong positive feelings towards such belongings. Expressions of such feelings often focused on the sociality of the object, accessed through indexical signs and traces of its previous history, and narratives about its previous phases became a kind of social currency that people actively drew on, when embedding them in their own lives, as well as in moments of exchange. Yet, we also saw that there is not necessarily a contradiction between expressing strong affection for objects and donating them or selling them on second-hand markets. On the contrary, part of the 'self-as-reuser' subjectivity entails the capacity not just to enter into caring and affectionate relationships with pre-used things, but also to let go of them in an equally caring and responsible way, through reuse channels. Notions of circularity thus shaped the way that interlocutors perceived and handled the objects, from the acts of purchasing them, and keeping them for a while, to passing them on. The overriding commitment was often to the longevity and integrity of the objects, as things-in-motion, rather than to extending one's own ownership of them.

We also saw how the notion of circulation as inherently good fits well with the kind of transient and immediate gratification associated with consumerism. The moral benefits from supporting a local charity shop by shopping in it, or from donating items that would otherwise have been let into the waste stream, can successfully be combined with satisfying cravings for renewal and a sense of change. Fieldwork at drop-off points showed how even though most people expressed a strong desire to avoid filling their homes with new goods, and said that they would refrain from buying newly produced items, they nevertheless said they were likely to bring home finds from second-hand markets. They regarded second-hand shopping as a responsible form of consumption that combines affordability with care for things, humans and the environment. In this respect, second-hand markets could be argued to accelerate the circulation of stuff, and thereby potentially raise overall levels of consumption (cf. Lougheed, Hird & Rowe 2016: 304).

While it would be easy to be critical of the potential environmental costs associated with the accelerated circulation of goods, for example of added transports, as well as any additional consumption of newly produced goods it may involve, it would be misplaced to conflate the practices discussed above with the kind of transient

consumerism that Bauman and others have criticized. In the type of thing-relations discussed above, we see a deep engagement with the objects, but one that for the individual owner may be of a short duration. Instead of regarding this shortlivedness as a sign of disposability, or lack of engagement and care, the passing along of the thing can be seen as an act of collective long-term commitment, where care is distributed serially. Even though the production of the self-as-reuser dovetails with neoliberal notions of identity projects, not least through the possibilities it affords for swift replacement of goods according to shifting trends, tastes, and preferences, the net effect is that care is extended beyond the individual subject, to the objects. Furthermore, second-hand practices entail a rejection of central components of liberal capitalist consumerism such as the ideal of newness, and the notion of commodities as anonymous and devoid of sociality.

The discussion also shows the need to analyse practices of divestment and dispossession in their situated context. Rather than be thought of as a monolithic category that involves certain given psychological and emotional processes, how motives for divesting are construed, and how the practices of selling, donating, or discarding are made sense of, will reflect and reproduce the broader social and cultural context (cf. Gregson et al 2007). In Sweden, characterized by widespread acceptance of practices of recycling and reuse, the process of letting go of an object into a second-hand market might not be so much about severing 'not me possessions' from the self (Roster 2001: 429) as it is a productive act of construing the self-as-reuser.

Notes

¹ In addition to participant observation, some 60 interviews with women and men in the age range of 20–80 years old were recorded. Research was conducted according to the ethical guidelines of the Swedish Research Council. Interviews lasted between 20 to 30 minutes (in shops) and two hours (in homes), and took place in the three types of locations mentioned above. Interviewees comprised customers in second-hand shops, some of whom I later interviewed in their homes, as well as people visiting drop-off points where they donated goods. They were from different socio-economic backgrounds, although those who accepted me into their homes tended to be more middle-class. I transcribed some of the interviews in their entirety, others partially, but all were listened to. Along with field notes, interviews were qualitatively analyzed in the light of theory in an iterative process where theoretical premises were adjusted in the light of findings.

² Balthazar (2016) describes how customers in a charity shop in the UK used the term 'character' to describe the inherent sociality, or 'fetish' quality of vintage items, whereas the term 'soul', or 'soulful', one of the expressions most frequently used by Swedes, apparently is not as common, an observation supported by the author's own conversations with second-hand retailers in the UK.

³ For a discussion on gifting in Sweden, see Peebles (2011).

⁴ In the second-hand shop, I conducted participant observation at the drop-off station during three visits of about six hours each, and several shorter follow-up visits. At the municipal recycling station, I conducted participation during three visits, each ranging between one and two hours.

⁵ The second-hand shop was situated close to an urban centre. Most arrived by car when they were donating items, but some walked, and one person came on a bicycle. At the recycling station, situated in an isolated spot some way out of town, all interviewees arrived by car.

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Competing Interests

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