Objects and Social Actions

On Second-hand Valuation Practices

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The Doctoral School of Organisation and Management Studies (OMS) is an interdisciplinary research environment at Copenhagen Business School for PhD students working on theoretical and empirical themes related to the organisation and management of private, public and voluntary organizations.

Foreword

This thesis concludes a three-year research project on values in second-hand markets. During that time I have visited second-hand shops and markets around the world and talked to people about used things, recycling, antiques and especially about the relationship people form with objects. It is remarkable how old things make people talk, and everywhere I have visited I have heard new stories. I have also heard about what second-hand means to different people in different places. In some Asian cultures old things carry the ghost of previous owners with them and in some places in the Balkans buying used is considered a bad omen of future poverty. Second-hand objects are powerful cultural artefacts that are seen as reminders of a time when objects were properly made on the one hand and of overconsumption on the other. Second-hand objects are embedded in layers of social and cultural meanings, in exchange relations and in environmental debates and are constantly contextualized; cherished and discarded, bought and sold. Although they enter into relations throughout their social lives, second-hand objects also appear to drop out of the flow as they end up in the back of a cupboard, at the bottom of a box or on the shelf in a thrift store.

In the following I have attempted to account for the complexity of the role of things in second-hand markets and combine attention to the social aspects as well as the material. The primary disciplinary orientation in the study is towards anthropology, which might be surprising since I am not an anthropologist. My

background in the humanities, in art history and visual culture, accounts for my interest in objects, but anthropological theory has provided me with a framework that is able to bridge the social and the material. The accompanying ethnographic approach allowed me to experience the entanglement up close. I describe the study as material culture because of the interdisciplinary approach that also draws on cultural geography and consumption studies. I suspect my interest in anthropology stems from my experience in working with anthropologist. For a number of years I assisted Professor Brian Moeran on various projects on creative industries and helped launch the Journal of Business Anthropology. I want to thank him for encouraging and cautioning me, but most importantly for inspiring me to pursue the interesting, if not the easy path. Working on the journal showed me how persuasive anthropological literature can be and throughout this project I felt myself being drawn in that direction. The result is an approach influenced by anthropology with the addition of relevant perspectives from other disciplinary fields.

The process of conducting a project like this, let alone writing it, is in many ways a solitary job. Throughout the process, however, I have been fortunate to have the support of colleagues and friends who have helped, inspired, criticised and listened. I would like to give all of them my warmest thanks. Most importantly I want to thank the employees, volunteers and managers at the Tavern Guild Community Thrift Store for allowing me to poke around and ask silly questions and for patiently teaching and guiding me. As the thesis shows they were an enormous source of knowledge and insight as well as wonderful colleagues. Without their kindness and help this project would not have been the same. I would also like to thank Martín Sánchez-Jankowski and Christine Trost from the Institute for the Study of Societal Issues at the University of California, Berkeley for hosting me while I was in California. I would also like to thank the people who made my explorative study in Bangkok possible. The owners of the companies I interviewed as well as the vendors and customers in the markets. Mostly I want to thank KT and Chet for their invaluable help and kindness, which has established lasting valuable relation across continents.

At the Copenhagen Business School my colleagues have helped and supported my study and made the everyday life enjoyable, especially Robert Strand, Sarah Netter, Oana Albu, Tina Müller, Wencke Gwozdz and Ana Alacovska. Most importantly I would like to thank Kirsti Reitan Andersen for her constant support, wonderful company and invaluable discussions in the office and on our numerous travels to conferences, meetings and other escapes. I hope to be able to continue our working relationship as well as our friendship. For great help forming and positioning my project I would like to thank Eric Guthey, Ole Bjerg, José Ossandón and Janice Denegri-Knott. My supervisors Esben Rahbek Gjerdrum Pedersen and Lise Skov have guided and helped me immensely and I thank them for moral as well as academic support. Lastly I want to thank my partner Anders for putting up with me over these last months.

Abstract

In this thesis I address the question of how value is created in second-hand markets. Focusing on the role of charity thrift stores I present an ethnographic account of fieldwork I undertook in the Tavern Guild Community Thrift Store in San Francisco. I analyse my ethnographic findings in light of contemporary literature on values and valuations in material culture and reaching back through the anthropological literature on commodities and gift economies I build a framework around David Graeber's formulation of a concept of social, relational value. In order to structure the analysis I take Mary Douglas's seminal work on classification as a starting point and argue that the practices of valuation constitute a process of transformation form discard to commodity. To support the analysis I introduce theoretical concepts from the ethnographic literature on values, second-hand markets and valuations. Practices of categorization enable the employees to create value, but disorder is a condition of the process, which hinders the flow as well as provides opportunity for value. I describe thrift, a considered use of resources, as the main 'infravalue' that drives the valuations and allows the organization to create economic, social and emotional value. Next I zoom in on the interaction between people and objects on a micro-level. The theoretical framework here brings anthropological theory into play with actor-network theory (ANT) approaches to nonhuman actors, and I introduce the term withdrawal from object-oriented philosophy to address the agency of objects in valuations. By

dividing the analysis into two parts I demonstrate in greater detail how objects as part of valuations are given agency through social entanglements, but also how the objects by their mere existence influence valuations beyond this entanglement. Their presence as more than the sum of their social relations has a profound impact on the valuations by resisting as much as partaking in the process of transformation. In the last section of the thesis I present an explorative study of the extended trajectory the objects take through markets and wholesale companies in Thailand. I discuss the role of the thrift store in the global context of second-hand exchanges and offer a critical reflection on the consequences of the proliferation of second-hand markets. The thesis provides a situated approach to the study of human-objects interactions and demonstrates that an understanding of the different forms of value that are at play reveal charity thrift organizations as important players in second-hand markets. Thrift enables the organization to salvage as many objects as possible while providing services to the community. In doing so they are vital in transforming discards into commodities for the other actors in the market. This study highlights the importance of considering materiality, and especially objecthood, in the context of second-hand markets, and suggests a situated framework for understanding the relationship between objects and practices in the broader context of material culture studies.

Resumé

I denne afhandling undersøger jeg hvordan værdi skabes i genbrugsmarkeder. Ved at fokusere på den rolle velgørenhedsorganisationers spiller præsenterer jeg et etnografisk studie af organisationen the Tavern Guild Community Thrift Store i San Fransisco. Ved hjælp af litteratur om værdi, genbrug og værdisætning indenfor materiel kultur analyserer jeg de etnografiske observationer og trækker en linie tilbage til Mauss ved at etablere et værdibegreb omkring David Graebers formulering af et social, relationelt værdibegreb. Analysen tager udgangspunkt i Mary Douglas' arbejde indenfor kulturel klassificering og jeg beskriver værdisætning som en praksis der transformerer affald til varer. Analysen understøttes af teoretiske begreber fra den etnografiske litteratur om genbrugsmarkeder. Kategoriseringspraksisser muliggør værdiskabelse, men uorden er en betingelse der bremser strømmen af objekter igennem organisationen, som samtidig skaber ny mulighed for værdi. Jeg beskriver organisationens velovervejede udnyttelse af de ressourcer de får doneret som den primære infraværdi (Graeber 2013) der muliggør skabelsen af økonomisk, social og emotionel værdi. Derefter zoomer jeg ind på interaktionen mellem mennesker og objekter på mikro-niveau. Den teoretiske ramme i dette afsnit bringer den antropologiske litteratur i spil med Aktør-Netværks-Teori og jeg introducerer det filosofiske perspektiv objekt-orienteret ontologi til at beskrive hvordan objekter trækker sig tilbage fra interaktionen. Ved at dele analysen op

demonstrerer jeg hvordan objekterne bliver tildelt agens igennem sociale relationer, men at objekter samtidig påvirker værdisætningen ud over det relationelle. Deres tilstedeværelse skaber modstand mod transformationen fra affald til vare. I den sidste del introducerer jeg et eksplorativt studie af den videre rute objekterne følger efter de har forladt genbrugsorganisationen. Gennem interviews med virksomhedsejere og handlende i Bangkok beskriver jeg den globale kontekst genbrugsorganisationerne er en del af, og bringer de tre niveauer sammen i en diskussion af genbrugsmarkeders udbredelse og professionalisering. Studiet præsenterer en situeret tilgang til forståelsen af menneske-objekt interaktioner og demonstrerer at ved at undersøge et spektrum af værdier blotlægges genbrugsorganisationerne som væsentlige spillere i de globale genbrugsmarkeder. Den velovervejede brug af ressourcer gør organisationerne i stand til at genbruge så mange objekter som muligt og skabe værdi for det samfund de er en del af. Igennem dette arbejde transformerer de affald til varer for de andre aktører i markedet. Studiet understreger vigtigheden i at betragte materialitet og især tingslighed som en faktor i genbrugsmarkeder og foreslår en situeret tilgang til at forstå forholdet mellem objekter og praksisser i materiel kultur.

Table of Content

Chapter 1

Introduction

'We could do the eBay thing to make more money, but that kinda defies the purpose of a thrift store' says Cliff as we walk behind the counter. Cliff is the manager of the arts department at the Tavern Guild Community Thrift Store (CTS) and is showing me how he sorts and prices the artworks, records and decorative items that the organization receives as donations on a daily basis. His statement is not made in response to any question I have raised, but as an expression of the sensibility in the CTS that running a thrift store is about more than making money. Like other charities that raise money by accepting material donations for resale, the CTS operates within a mixed economic setting that combines elements of gifting as well as market exchanges. Raising money for the charities they partner with and making the most of the donations they receive is at the core of the operation; but throughout my fieldwork I found many examples of how other values, such as community spirit and concern for the need of their patrons, were regarded as equally important. Customers I talked to who buy the second-hand objects describe the value of their purchases in terms of the excitement or the pleasure they bring. Some donors find solace in giving to charities that their deceased relatives would have liked to help. These values, along with many others, are expressed in the sorting and valuation of the objects that are donated and resold. Through a set of practices, the employees and volunteers transform the donations or discards into marketable commodities. Although the value of second-hand objects is highly contextual, these practices stabilise the value momentarily by considering their material, social and economic good. In this thesis I present an ethnographic study of the practices of valuation in the Tavern Guild Community Thrift Store in San Francisco. The purpose of the study is to identify what makes used things valuable as cultural commodities. In order to do so, I trained and worked in the organization as a sorter over a period of six months. Through that process I was able to observe and participate in the practices involved and to experience and record the formal as well as tacit knowledge that is necessary to value second-hand objects.

I start by presenting an ethnographic account of the fieldwork I undertook in the CTS. Next I analyse my ethnographic findings in light of contemporary literature on values and valuations in material culture to address the question of how value is created in second-hand markets. Reaching back through the anthropological literature on commodities and gift economies I build a framework around David Graeber's formulation of a concept of social, relational value. In order to structure the analysis I take Mary Douglas's seminal work on categorization as a starting point and argue that the practices of valuation constitute a process of transformation. To support the analysis I introduce theoretical concepts from the ethnographic literature on values, second-hand markets and valuations. In some instances I compare my observations with related studies to address empirical as well as theoretical points. Next I zoom in on the interaction between people and objects at a micro-level. The theoretical framework here brings anthropological theory into play with actor-network theory (ANT) approaches to nonhuman actors, and I introduce a distinct perspective from philosophy to address the agency of objects in valuations. By dividing the analysis into two parts I demonstrate in greater detail how objects as part of valuations are given agency through social entanglements, but also how the objects by their mere existence influence valuations beyond this entanglement. Their presence as more than the sum of their social relations has a profound impact on the valuations. In the last section of the thesis I present an explorative study of the extended trajectory the objects take through markets and wholesale companies in Thailand. I discuss the role of the thrift store in the global context of second-hand exchanges and offer a critical reflection on the consequences of the proliferation of second-hand markets.

This study highlights the importance of considering materiality, and especially objecthood, in the context of second-hand markets, and suggests a framework for understanding the relationship between objects and practices in the broader context of material culture studies. By way of introduction I will describe the field and the subject this study addresses. As valuations are embedded in a larger cultural context, I begin by presenting a number of discussions that have informed this study and address the literature on second-hand markets.

Second-hand Exchanges

Valuing used things is a practice that has become increasingly widespread around the world with the proliferation of second-hand markets. Online market places are growing and companies, organizations and individuals are involved in global flows of used objects on an unprecedented scale. Selling and buying used things has been done throughout history, but changes over recent decades have seen second-hand objects enter the cultural economy in new ways. Where used objects were earlier associated with poverty and carried social stigma, they are now featured in lifestyle magazines and are described as 'fun', 'authentic' and 'unique'.[1] Looking at the history of consumption around used objects demonstrates both changes and continuities. Although second-hand stores still

[1] See for example Fontaine (ed.) (2008) for historical accounts of second-hand exchanges.

cater to consumers who are financially challenged, and although used objects are still supplied in humanitarian crises such as wars, famines and natural disasters, the availability of cheap household products has led to a decrease in the number of consumers who are solely dependent on used goods in order to acquire basic household items (Arold & Koring 2008). Some consumer research suggests that second-hand shops are in fact offering a type of hedonistic shopping experience to less affluent consumers—an experience from which they would otherwise be excluded—and thus presenting an opportunity for empowerment to marginalized groups of consumers (Williams & Paddock, 2003). Modern thrift stores first started emerging during the Depression in the US (Strasser 1992). The number of second-hand stores and the size of the trade then greatly increased in the 1970s with the emergence of a budding consumer interest in protecting the environment. Especially since the mid-1990s, many western cultures have seen a dramatic rise in interest in used objects (Gregson & Crewe 2003). A large part of this may be attributed to a cultural change that has seen a growing sense of nostalgia, retro, and referentialism enter popular culture. Fashion historian Barbara Vinken has described this ‘zeitgeist’ as *post-fashion*, involving a heightened attention to the temporality of fashion as a cultural expression, and she describes how designers express this awareness of the past, the transience of designs, and expose the construction of novelty (Vinken 2005). Although second-hand objects are reaching new markets, thrift and second-hand stores still provide accessible household products to less affluent consumers as well. Given the composite nature of the second-hand economy it is difficult to estimate the market share of charity organisations, but in Europe and the United States, and to a lesser extent in Asia, charity organizations make up a significant share, especially at the beginning of the value chain. The penetration of the Internet has facilitated the exchange of used objects online in a number of different ways, ranging from informal non-monetary platforms to highly commercial and formal marketplaces.[2] Many charity organizations are also turning their attention online, with varying degrees of success, though most of them still operate primarily offline.

The growing interest in second-hand over recent decades is also noticeable in a number of research fields, including anthropology, sociology and cultural geography. At the intersection of consumption and production, second-hand exchanges touch on a number of fields and most studies address issues relating to consumption and material culture. Current research includes studies of charity shops and second-hand markets in different parts of the world (Horne & Maddrell 2002, Tranberg Hansen 2000), the global flows of used commodities (Crang et al. 2012, Gregson et al. 2010) and the impact of second-hand trade on cultures all over the world (Gregson et al. 2003, Gregson & Crewe 1998, Norris 2010), but so far only a few studies have addressed the collecting and sorting that takes place in organizations (Botticello 2012). As many of these studies demonstrate, second-hand exchange and used objects are not limited to the realm of consumption and commerce. Objects as parts of the household and as objects of exchange have penetrated many areas of social life in many parts of the world and relate issues of consumption, waste and production.

Second-hand Objects—Between Waste and Commodity

Objects that enter second-hand markets have at some point been discarded. Talking to donors, it is clear, however, that that does not mean their potential reuse or resale value was not identified by the discarding party. Still, at some point the decision was made to get rid of the object. Therefore the objects can be considered discarded, at least until they are reinstated as valuable objects or commodities in

[2] Denegri-Knott et al. (2009) have described these online exchanges as they are practices on eBay.

the cultural circuit. Although not all discards are considered waste, the demarcation is often difficult to identify. Whether or not they constitute waste, second-hand objects often start their lives as leftovers of conventional consumption. In her book *Purity and Danger* (1966), Douglas defines dirt as matter out of place (1966:35). Her seminal statement has often been the starting point of studies of second-hand markets as well as of studies of waste and discards. By making dirt a structural matter, Douglas offers an approach to the study of the remainders of consumption. As she argues:

> '…if uncleanliness is matter out of place, we must approach it through order.'
>
> (Douglas 1966: 40)

When something is out of place it disturbs order and becomes dirt or waste. Order, of course, is contextual and can be highly local. Order in some places is considered disorder or unintelligible bulking in other places and to other people. Even to the same person, different orders may be at play at the same time, making it difficult to define one conclusive ordering system. Hence even the dirt that is out of place becomes unfocused and, in Douglas' own argument, disables the restoration of the proper order. Even through order, trash can be difficult to define, but the statement offers a way to approach the uncategorizable and suggests both a method of how to deal with it and the danger or potency of discards.

Dirt is a matter of cultural categorization, and it is clear from looking at the objects in second-hand exchanges that they are powerful as cultural representations. In the anthology *Trash Culture* (2010), Gillian Pye outlines how trash has influenced European literature and philosophy. She describes the 'autonomy' of things when they are outside the realm of the useful that constitutes a primary intelligible value or identity for objects in society (Pye 2010: 6) . Autonomy is a possibility for subversion but not a necessary direction; autonomy may also leave the object isolated and beyond visibility. In a symbolic sense, the object escapes reality and floats freely until reinstated by the rag-picker, a figure that was hailed by Benjamin and Baudelaire as a figure of freedom that represents an escape from bourgeois society. Adorno, on the other hand, described rag-picking as the 'ultimate form of capitalism' whereby the last drop of exchange value is extracted when the rag-picker repossesses the object. The practices of ordering and sorting trash become a form of sense-making of the abject, the repressed (after Freud). Reclaiming the object into the realm of things that can be dominated is the main objective of categorization. Waste becomes so powerful that, as Steiner suggests in the same volume, 'Garbage makes it clear that things are not only objects, but subjects of culture' (Steiner 2010: 133). Trash transcends the boundaries between the animalistic, the natural and the synthetic. Following Douglas, when something is trash it is difficult to differentiate whether it is a household good or a foodstuff, or perhaps a family heirloom. In that sense people's relationship with things becomes uneasy. For while on the one hand they serve purposes and help make sense of our everyday lives, and are to some extent dominated by our ability to produce and use them, they also 'refuse' or oppose us in our usage. In a later chapter I will return to this point and also describe how they may even be said to rebel. Their anthropomorphic nature, or our desire to inscribe them with some sort of being, is in turn a relief as well as a curse: they may come back to haunt us. Steiner does not stop short of describing how inanimate objects remind us of death. The danger of impurity is ever-present.

'Out of place-ness' is a matter of cultural categories, but it is also a material issue. The use of used things raises questions of pollution, impurity and contagion.

Later I will describe how the employees at the thrift store work constantly to eradicate impurity and the measures that are enforced to secure both their own and their customers' safety and convenience. As Douglas describes, people have been concerned with the impure for centuries, especially in relation to religious practices. Consider the resistance to mixing pure and impure objects, and even pure and impure persons, in relation to the organised resistance to old things that started in the early decades of the twentieth century, the widespread suspicion towards used objects becomes understandable. Things that people in industrialised economies would recognize as waste today were considered valuable resources in the household before industrialized production took over. Strasser, in her account of the history of waste practices in the US, describes the influence of advertising and books promoting modernity as the 'progressive obsolescence' that helped rid American consumers of their conservative habit of saving and repairing (2000: 196). In a time when trash and insufficient resources were less of an issue (although Strasser gives an excellent account of just how big an issue trash in American cities has always been), buying and discarding was seen as a good way of strengthening American supremacy. Strasser frames her argument on Douglas's definition of dirt. In fact Strasser's account is the story of how it is only recently that trash has come to be considered inanimate matter. Earlier, trash provided a living for a large number of people and recycling trash was carried out on an enormous scale, although such recycling was not necessarily seen as an environmentally conscious action. The historical aspect provides knowledge of how societies at different times in history have valued things differently and how use-value has historically been a higher measure of worth, and also how, according to Strasser, consumers needed to learn not to reuse and save, tracing the historical roots of modern consumption patterns. The orders that categorize waste as unwanted and potentially dangerous are localized geographically, culturally and temporally.

In this thesis I apply Douglas's structural approach to the analysis of valuation practices in a second-hand organization, and it is worth describing the link that Douglas identifies between categorization and pollution. The title of her book, after all, is *Purity and Danger*. She defines dirt as matter out of place, meaning that objects are not dirty in themselves but can become dirty if they, as Gregson et al. argue: 'transgress particular cultural categorizations, creating cultural disease' (. 2007: 189). Contamination is therefore cultural as well as physical. Douglas's analysis has been widely influential and reflects the tendency, even in literary representations, to view discarded objects and waste as uncontrollable and potentially dangerous. Structuring is an act of domination that attempts to herd objects into an intelligible space. As Gregson et al. describe: ''out' here is a beyond; it is an elsewhere beyond a border which has the capacity to accommodate cultural dirt and troublesome meanings precisely because it lies beyond' (2007: 198). The potency of the transgressional object is not always viewed with suspicion, however. Jane Bennett describes the vibrancy of objects as a condition, and one that social research must acknowledge. Other scholars have considered the possibilities of disorder as a space of possibilities (Denegri-Knott & Parsons 2014), or have seen the remainder—the discarded—as offering a potential lens onto society (Liboiron 2014).

Approaches to the Study of Second-hand Markets

Mary Douglas's defining statement has informed a number of studies of discard and second-hand practices focusing on the relational nature of cultural categories (e.g., Gregson et al. 2007, Botticello 2012). Botticello describes the importance of categorization and systematization in sorting facilities for the organizations involved and how it relates to transforming waste into commodities. Other studies of reuse and second-hand objects have focused on social and cultural experiences in consumer markets or on structures and economic flows (Crewe & Gregson 1998, Norris 2010, Hansen 2000, Gregson et al. 2010) and the role of charity shops in contemporary communities (Broadbridge & Parsons 2003, Horne & Maddrell 2002, Tranberg Hansen 2000, Crang et al. 2012, Gregson et al. 2003). Others have addressed the circulation of second-hand objects (Crewe 2003, Hughes 2005) and contemporary and historical consumer practices (Domina & Kock 1999, Damme & Vermoesen 2009). Although some studies address other types of objects, clothes have been at the centre of most studies in the field. Nicky Gregson and other geographers have steadily produced an impressive and valuable body of knowledge about flea markets, second-hand shops, second-hand consumption patterns, repair practices and alternative retail spaces. They have contributed immensely to the study of used things, but their studies often revolve around clothing. Gregson et al describe the difference between clothes and other types of second-hand objects in terms of their proximity to the body (2000), but there are other features that make clothing a patent object of study. Clothes present the most homogenous type of product that second-hand industries handle. As I experienced working in the sorting at the CTS clothing can be categorized and systematized relatively easily: tops, bottoms, men's, women's, cotton or wool, etc. In contrast, other types of products are more difficult to categorize and require a lot more categories. Household products, for example, are much more difficult to streamline in a sorting process. Donations in these sections consist of bulks of different products like lamps, cups, plates, pillows, ashtrays and packages of paperclips, and are therefore more difficult to categorize. Another reason why clothing has taken a prominent position in this research has to do with the amount of clothing that the average person in the Global North consumes and disposes of, which is far greater than the amount of pots and pans that are disposed of. As the fashion industry is notorious for championing the fast consumerism that sees low-quality products at a low price hit the market on a constant basis, the need to study how to alleviate the problems caused by this phenomenon is pressing. In this study I focus on practices and not on a specific type of object, but I describe the valuation practices of a number of object categories, including clothing. I found that the more composite categories served well as lenses for understanding the practices of valuation.

Discard Studies

In addition to the structural approach offered by Douglas, the growing interest in reuse and waste has spurred a new sub-field of research loosely defined as discard studies (Liboiron 2014). Although the studies and literature related to this sub-field constitute a highly interdisciplinary collection, they are unified by a critical approach to the study of waste and wasting. Informed by queer theory, amongst other things, the field shares an interest in the 'uneven remainders'—the things that do not fit neatly into categories (Shaffer 2014). As a commentary on recycling literature and practices, discard studies address the shortcomings of systematic approaches such as zero-waste ideologies. These closed-loop systems are described as systems of power in which waste is something that can be managed away. Discard studies point to the fact that there will always be waste, and that waste *is* or *can be* useful (Alexander & Reno 2012). Addressing the ideal, discard studies propose a more mundane focus on the reality of waste management, of which second-hand industries arguably form a part. Stephen Jackson (2014) describes his approach as a *broken world* thinking that takes erosion, breakdown and decay as its starting point. Although Jackson is mainly interested in repair, waste and reuse represent similar commentaries on a less than perfect system that is fixated on producing novelty and growth instead of taking care of what is already *in the world*. In this process industrialized societies have promoted a wasteful consumer culture where used things are thrown away. It is becoming increasingly clear, however, that there will soon be no ‘away’ to throw things and that the constant production of new things based on exploiting natural resources is unsustainable. Discard studies offers a view that reimagines the role of waste in the world and points to the inherent flaws and contingencies in managerial systems.

I have adopted this approach as part of the framework for my study. Instead of being a critique of the ideal of cradle-to-cradle thinking, this study supplements and anchors these efforts in the practical reality of everyday life. Systemic approaches imagine a perfect closed system that elegantly transforms previously used objects into raw materials. While most societies benefit from efficient waste management, the efficiency these systems promise can have the effect of glossing over the reality of a wasteful society. This is done, on the one hand, by expelling discards into the invisible world of garbage trucks operating while people sleep and into landfills hidden away on the outskirts of cities (Nagle 2013), and on the other by rebranding discards as ‘resources’, in a sense eliminating the problem altogether.[3] Discard studies point to the fact that no matter how efficient the loop, other types of waste will appear. The mundane perspective on waste also highlights the fact that not all types of waste are bad. The organizations that I study operate in this intermediary position: on the one hand as useful by transforming discards into marketable commodities and reducing waste; on the other hand as being deeply imbedded in a wasteful society. As Strasser describes,

[3] Renaming the largest incineration plant in Copenhagen a ’resource center’ is an example of this tendency.

an investigation into the waste of a society and the practices around waste represents ‘the other side of consumption’ (1992).

Strasser and other authors in this field place waste, trash and remainders in a dialectical relationship with consumption in society. Moore (2012) maps out the different, almost ontological approaches to garbage and waste that are circulating in contemporary literature on the subject. She even presents these approaches in a figure along two axes to demonstrate how waste is defined or conceptualized either as something ‘in itself’ or, at the other end, as largely indeterminable—something that doesn’t easily fit categorization (Moore 2012: 782). The other axis marks to what degree waste is seen as separated from society. Seeking to avoid rigidity, Moore manages to make the differences comprehensible and to demonstrate what difference these perceptions of waste can make to the discourse on the political and societal impact of waste. Approaches that consider waste as a resource often describe how waste empowers the people who have to make a living dealing with it. Second-hand organizations are part of this story because they transform discards into commodities. As second-hand objects have become part of contemporary consumer culture, the experiential aspects of dealing with used objects are highlighted. As Moore describes: ‘Wasted objects tell stories about contemporary culture from the margins, the left behind’ (2012: 787). This statement clearly highlights the potency of discards and the romanticism and nostalgia that surrounds old things. Culturally, people easily fall into the trap of wanting these objects to be meaningful and to express something that a society wants to eradicate. Somehow waste is supposed to be able to say something about us that we do not want someone (whoever this someone might be) to find out. Waste and discards are not just practical issues that need to be handled or objects in markets—they are also laden with social meaning.

Douglas's description of dirt has taken pride of place in discard studies, but has also been challenged. Fittingly, Moore criticises symbolic approaches such as the one Douglas adopts for not getting into the dirt but staying on a linguistic level of analysis. Still, Douglas's structural perspective has been and remains highly influential and useful. Studies of reuse and second-hand industries, following Douglas and Appadurai (1986), have shown how systems and categories help organizations to create hierarchies of worth and re-establish discarded objects as valuable (Botticello 2012, Gregson et al. 2010). In the study I present here I follow the structural approach as an initial way of making sense of valuations; but keeping the view from the margins in mind, I also describe how contingency and disorder is crucial to the creation of values in second-hand exchanges. The difficulty of predicting what will be donated and the quality of the donations is a hindrance as well as an opportunity in the process of making discarded objects valuable. Denegri-Knott and Parsons (2014) have discussed disorder as a productive state that highlights the ambiguity of objects.

Second-hand Consumption

The demarcation between consumption and production is blurred in second-hand markets, whether directly when consumers become online vendors or through consumer donations that become the 'raw material' for organizations like the CTS to create value. Consumption is central to these markets as input and output at both ends of the markets. As such, consumption has great impact both in practical terms and analytically. Whether second-hand markets are signs of overconsumption, greater environmental concern, rising poverty or growing economic exploitation, what consumption 'is' has great relevance. Second-hand consumption is often considered an element of sustainable or alternative consumption (Gregson 2012) and understanding how practices in second-hand markets relate to conventional consumption practices is relevant. What second-hand markets make blatantly clear is that it is difficult to define what consumption is in the first place. As Graeber argues, the umbrella term covers most human practices (2011: 491). The term consumption, as opposed to production, is part of a dichotomy that separates the two spheres. Graeber describes how this separation became a defining feature of capitalism with the advent of industrial production. The separation may also in part be responsible for the marginal position occupied by second-hand industries and practices. Not only, as Strasser points out, did people need to be educated to stop taking care of and collecting and redistributing discards, the conceptual separation of production and consumption in capitalist economies helped make reuse seem immoral. The way second-hand consumption practices have been seen as alternative is connected to this blurring of the lines between different spheres and in the following I explore this notion as I describe the values that drive valuations in the context of a thrift store.

At the intersection of production, waste and consumption, charity stores and thrift stores often represent the first step in a long line of organizations, buyers and individuals selling and buying second-hand objects. Charities accept donations directly from individuals and sell many of the objects on to private buyers. In the CTS, buyers are extremely important and have a direct and indirect influence on valuations and pricing. Many of the buyers are local and sell the objects on in their own stores in San Francisco or wholesale to local stores and companies. In some cases, the objects they buy are resold just a few hundred metres down the street for three times the price for which they were originally bought. Generally, the price of a second-hand objects increases every time they are sold on professionally after they are donated.[4] As I will describe in the final section, the contextualization of

[4] This is a very general statement and through the thesis I will describe the fluctuations of prices in more detail.

the object is crucial to its increase in economic value. In each case the sorting is refined and the context is more specialized than the one before. This puts economic pressure on the organizations that handle the objects at the beginning of the trajectory; and the way in which thrift stores like the CTS negotiate this position demonstrates how different values are created and maintained. The role of charity organizations in global trajectories is not only that of the first step in a number of exchanges in consumer markets. Tranberg Hansen (2000) has described how donations from western countries are sold to private wholesale companies and then to vendors in markets in Zambia and other African countries. This represents one of the global trajectories that donated objects can follow, and in my explorative study in Thailand I encountered another trajectory from donation to resale. Many of the vendors and company owners I interviewed described a market on the Cambodian border where many of them would buy vintage and used American clothes. In this trajectory the donation is extended over decades before the objects return to the sphere of consumption.

The subject of this project places the research conceptually between the spheres of production and consumption and between disposal and acquisition. The role of thrift stores constitutes a transformation where a number of practices are performed to turn discards from the sphere of consumption into commodities for the sphere of consumption. Following other approaches in cultural industries, Podkalicka and Meese have described the role of charity shops as that of a cultural intermediary (2012). This role, which combines economic and social responsibilities, works to remake the value of discarded objects. I have pursued this intermediary role from a slightly different angle by describing second-hand organizations as facilitators of events whereby things can change state on their social trajectory. The intermediary role of these organizations is further emphasized by the interaction between aspects of both gift and commodity exchanges in second-hand markets.

Values and Valuation

In a study of valuation, values are difficult to escape. As in any other market, what something is worth is of the utmost importance, and in second-hand markets the price is highly volatile. Unlike other consumer markets, second-hand markets rarely have prefixed prices attached to them, such as a recommended sales price or a calculation based on production price and premium. Of course, most pricings in consumer markets are market-based in nature and are established mainly on an estimation of what consumers are willing to pay. Value in second-hand markets comprises other measures as well, however, and in the following I will show how different values affect valuations and the markets in different ways.

Gifts and Commodities

Second-hand markets are complex economic settings that exhibit features of both market-based and gift economies. The objects clearly demonstrate that they indeed have what Appadurai has described as social lives (1986) as they move between waste, consumption and market. Although following the trajectory through sorting and resale I discovered that in second-hand markets it seems that the objects are both gifts and commodities at the same time. They arrive as donations, though not always as pure gifts, because some donors claim the donations for tax purposes. The commodities in the store are not pure commodities, since one of their purposes is to make gifts possible, and provide good for the community, as I will describe later. The relations that make the objects gifts or commodities establish them as being simultaneously both. These categories arise from the regimes of value that are in place in the charity thrift store, which include the values of providing cheap household products, raising money for charity and minimizing waste. In Appadurai's framework, things move between stages of commoditization, and based on this notion others have explored the possibility of hybridity between commodities and gifts. Herrmann (1997) argues that garage sales represent alternative exchange spaces in western market systems—spaces where exchanges take market form while retaining elements of gifting. Herrmann's characterization of garage sales mirrors Gregson's extensive work on various expressions of second-hand exchanges, including charity shops, car-boot sales and retro vendors (e.g., Gregson & Brooks 2003). Herrmann and Gregson both describe how second-hand exchanges establish spaces for alternative consumption that challenge hegemonic perceptions of western market economies by blending ontological categories; although, as Gregson points out, there is a relational simultaneity and not opposition in place (Gregson, Brooks & Crewe 2003: 102). Herrmann sees the garage sale as an example of the hybridity of transactions in 'the market', but she also questions if all form of exchanges must be presented in the rhetoric of the market.

In order to determine how second-hand objects become valuable the question is then which features of commodities and gifts the objects retain at any given time. Mauss's theory of the gift (1990 [1950]) extends relations between the giver and the receiver and binds them in reciprocity. This property of gifting has allocated the practice outside western market systems. As Herrmann and others have since argued these two systems can operate simultaneously and second-hand markets demonstrate the complexity of this relationship. Although the overall aim of the charity organizations is to generate money for their charity work, many of them consider other aspects of the operation as valuable as well. For some, helping people get access to cheap household products is a priority; for some the social aspects of volunteering are important; and for others the environmental benefits of reuse are valuable to the organization. At least that is what I have encountered in the number of charities in different countries I have researched or worked with. These aims often go hand in hand with economic goals and make the valuation of donated objects a complex negotiation between different regimes of value. Considering the objects only as commodities would be to overlook important features of the valuation process. Alternatively, describing charity organizations and the donations people give as a system of gifting ignores underlying motivations and economic factors that are also important to the donors as well as the organizations and the causes they support. What appears to surface in this debate is that second-hand valuations cannot be understood only as an expression of economic maximization. Some donors mainly give to charity to get a tax refund, and some only donate to feel better about consuming; but, as Graeber argues, while you can always find self-interest you can also find altruism (2001: 29). Whether people are actually doing good by donating or by buying used items is an entirely different matter; the fact that they are driven by a desire to do good, and perceive their actions as beneficial, makes it a relevant aspect of the analysis. The same is true of the sorters and the organization as a whole. Whether the money they raise does good or whether it is better environmentally to reuse objects does not change the fact that this concern to do good is part of what motivates the sorters to get the most out of the donations. In the analysis, I follow Graeber's argument that the best way to avoid reducing an analysis of value or valuations to an economic assessment is by understanding the relation aspects of value.

Objects, Things, Stuff or Commodities

This study is about valuation practices but it is also a study of objects. Entering a thrift store you realize how things, stuff and objects are everywhere and that the handling of used objects is what brings this whole market into being. In the literature, several terms are used to describe the non-human material entities that are the focus of this study—objects, things, stuff, goods, commodities and a number of other terms that indicate various levels of specificity in meaning. This multiplicity also reflects the broad selection of meanings the terms indicate, and the fact that many are used both in everyday language and in academic contexts makes them even more confusing. I use all of them with as much specificity as possible, but the disorder this inconsistency indicates is also a condition of any study in this field. Whether something is a thing or an object is often debatable, and I will not attempt to resolve the issue here—mainly because it is sometimes irrelevant given the broadness of the terms, and secondly because in many cases objects are simultaneously things. I generally use the term objects to indicate the specific orientation towards objects based on object-oriented philosophy (Morton 2011), which I will introduce to account for the agency of non-human objects later in the analysis.

The instability indicated by the lack of terminological clarity, however, may also be a defining feature of objects. Parsons and Denegri-Knott have argued that disorder may be a productive state that establishes a space for the ambiguity of objects (Denegri-Knott & Parsons 2014). Going deeper into the materiality of the matter, Jane Bennett has argued that we need to reconsider our concept of matter and materiality in a way that allows vibrancy in the things that surround us (Bennett 2010). Bennett argues that things are constantly provoking our existence, as we are provoking or manipulating the existence of other materialities in the world. She insists that if we accept the material world, not as a manifest constant entity but as vibrant fluctuating matter not so different from our own human inconsistency, we can study cultural and social phenomena as unstable constructed objects without any pretence of fixating meaning into structured lasting truths. Following her line of thought in the study of value allows for a greater attention to the material features of things, and although values are not intrinsic or stable, attention to how the materiality of objects influences the valuation can affect the outcome. Terminology and matter address different levels of enquiry, but both indicate that ambiguity is a property at each levels.

The materiality of objects affects social action, but what about the 'thingness' of objects— the temporary stability of these objects in cultural categories? In *The System of Objects* (2005) Baudrillard explores the relationship between objects and people in the age of modernity. He distinguishes between the technical aspects of objects and the practices and is interested in how practices affect techniques. According to Baudrillard, interior design, the way things are organized in the home, reflects a larger openness in the social interaction of human beings than in traditional bourgeois homes. It does not constitute a 'liberation proper' as Marx would say, as it only reflects a liberation from the function of things but not the thing itself (2005: 17–18). In his view, modernity has liberated things, including furniture, from ritual, ceremonial (moral) structures, and expresses the liberation of human beings. Again, however, it is only from their functional objectification that have they been freed, not in their entire person or object (2005: 18). Things no longer have individual presence, and there is a loss of understanding of thingness, materiality, in a world that is increasingly perceived to be immaterial. Baudrillard's characterization of people's relationship with objects suggests that they no longer believe objects hold any sway over them. But as Bennett (2010) describes, things have a unique way of assuming power over us, especially when they have the power of numbers. This suggests, that the power has been given very little attention with the availability of new things, especially the power of the individual objects. The thing-ness of things, or what I describe as objecthood, is dramatically different from their materiality. This difference and the undermining of objects as Harman (2011) would describe it is central to the second part of the analysis in chapter four, and in the final discussion I will return to the consideration of the presence of objects in relation to value and waste.

Objecthood

Objects are present in the world as material entities, but objects also provoke emotional reactions. In the anthology *Evocative Objects*, Sherry Turkle (2011) addresses the relationship between people and things. Turkle is especially interested in the evocative abilities of certain objects—those that remind us of the past or of specific situations. She examines the object as the centre of knowing and approaches objects from a number of different directions. Throughout the whole book a sense of loss is detectable, as objects somehow remind us of things, events and people passed away. Besides loss, objects in the Freudian tradition can also be uncanny—familiar yet unfamiliar. This quality suggests that objects are both powerful social actors, even emotional tools, and something we do not know or trust completely. This makes Bennett argument that the vibrancy of matter cannot be ignored even more potent, and when she uses the example of hoarding to describe vibrancy, the feeling of being literally overwhelmed by objects is not far away Bennett (Vera List Center 2011).

Just like waste, objects are viewed with suspicion. Often in accounts of relationships between people and things the nature of things is portrayed rather malevolently: things ‘take over’, objects carry unbearable emotional weight.[5] They even ‘withdraw’ as in Heidegger’s ontology of objects, —they hide something— and we can never fully access them, dominate or understand them (1953 [2010]). Most of these examples, whether artistic or philosophical, are meant to broaden our understanding of the human-object relationship, and as such seek to revitalize the non-human and make us aware of its influence. But the descriptions and characterizations often turn out rather foreboding. If material objects, things, are given any agency, it seems to be to refuse, reject and obstruct the structure of human life, or to be potent reminders of something we want to forget. In the study I present here I attempt to investigate the agency of objects in a more positive light by highlighting all the instances where objects play along as well. Most of the time the interactions between the employees and the objects they handle in the thrift store are uncomplicated. Although some employees expressed a weariness, like Ned, for example, who exclaimed ‘I’ve worked here for four years: I am through with stuff’, many employees expressed interest and delight in exploring the objects as they came in. Clive called the thrift store a cultural library: ‘you see stuff that you’d forgotten existed or stuff you never knew existed’. In general in the organization the relationship between people and objects is characterized by an interest in the objects as well as in what those objects can do. Even the objects that are uncategorizable or discarded provide enjoyment. The walls of the back room are covered with found objects that have been donated over the years but have not been sold. Many photographs of unknown donors decorate the walls, and from the gate at the back door there is a collection of stuffed animals hanging on display. The attitude towards objects is more playful than suspicious. The otherness of objects does seem to factor in, not as foreboding but as something that resists

[5] Several of the accounts in Turkle (2011) express this tension and it forms the basis of Bennett’s discussion of hoarding as well (Vera List Center 2011).

structure. In the second part of the analysis I define this otherness as 'withdrawal' in order to approach it with specificity rather than suspicion and show how it effectuates both positive and negative results.

Practices and Use

Throughout this study, use is a constituting factor. Although second-hand objects may not have been used before they are donated, they were originally purchased with use in mind. The use of objects and use as a cultural category are at the same time an elusive and concrete subject to study. Theoretically, use is often approached as practice and the study of practices delivers some important and relevant insights into what the uses of objects are. The theoretical tradition of practice perspectives often draws on Bourdieu's theory of practice, which positions practices between the collective and individual aspects of our actions. Practices are learned and evoke a whole social structure in our way of doing things. This would of course include our way of using objects. Use is not a socially or culturally neutral action; it requires learning and practice (Bourdieu 1977). I develop an understanding of valuations based on a practice approach, but use is also something else. Marx's understanding of use-value in contrast to exchange-value forms the basis of Bourdieu's understanding of use. I will return to Marx in a later chapter, but here mention that use as a utilitarian value only describes certain aspects of use. Use as process, as time spent with an object, also affects the object. It becomes individual as Turkle (2011) points out. Through use, objects form emotional connections with people as they become part of their lives. In second-hand markets the effects of use such as emotional ties and the signs of wear can be valuable, though not in a utilitarian sense. Practice perspectives are rooted in structural as well as phenomenological schools of thought. Heidegger presents the notion that things only really present themselves to us when they defy our use of them. The moment something is broken or resists its regular use—something that is stuck in a bottle, a lamp that does not switch on, etc.—is when we notice its presence. Of course, an unused object can be faulty, but mainly such resistance appears in the use of the object. Heidegger's description of this event underlines the tension between the person and the thing. Use cannot be understood solely as usefulness. This tension highlights how, whether we look at them in Marxist economic terms or as part of a Heideggerian life world, valuation practices exist in the intersection between life worlds and systems of exchange.

Time is an important factor in understanding the concept of use in connection with things. On a basic level, time constitutes use in that use can be said to be time spent engaging with something. In other words, use is a process. In conventional markets for cultural products, time changes the status of the objects considerably. In an economy that is obsessed with novelty, ageing equals economic decrease. In second-hand markets, I found that economic value may decrease over time as well, as with most common household goods and clothing, appliances, cars and electronics. However, economic value may increase as the object gains value from a period of use, as in the case of certain antiques, used jeans, old Vietnamese rice bowls and other objects. Thompson (1979) has put forward an economic theory of value in second-hand markets which shows that in terms of value creation these markets require a completely different set of criteria for establishing value than the criteria that apply in the conventional value chain.

Markets are intimately connected to the supply chain, and while this is true for most markets, in the case of second-hand markets supply is not something that is easy to manage. Donors are pivotal in supplying new goods. And even with a steady stream of post-consumer discards to handle, the organization can never predict exactly what will be donated. Although this feature limits the possibilities of managing the market, it may also be a key feature in what drives consumers to engage with these markets. In their studies of second-hand cultures, Crewe et al. (2003) report on the widespread love of the ‘hunt’ expressed by individual consumers, how getting a bargain is a feature, and even professional dealers talk about the identity connected with this alternative economy. The fact that second-hand markets are different or alternative may be both a barrier and an opportunity for the organizations involved. As Aspers notes in his introduction to his book on markets, markets do not appear in isolation; they are embedded in each other (2011: 2). The object of this dissertation is not to define what constitutes a second-hand market but rather what practices are involved in making the objects that are exchanged valuable. Therefore I will not discuss in detail the definition of markets in general or the specifics of second-hand markets. Drawing on Aspers, I use the term market as an umbrella term. Aspers presents a loose approach to markets as ‘a social structure for the exchange of rights in which offers are evaluated and priced, and compete with one another, which is shorthand for the fact that actors – individuals and firms – compete with one another via offers. This definition covers the market as a place, as well as markets as an “institution.”.’(2011: 4). He underlines how the term refers to both institutions and physical space or places. The thrift store that is the focus of this study is an actor in second-hand market(s), and in the following I retain the broadness of definition and focus on the different markets as well as gift-like exchanges that influence valuations. Markets are a central part of a capitalist economy, but markets exist in some form or other in different economic settings. Markets are naturally an integral part of the commoditization of used objects; but market forces, the competition between sellers and buyers, are not the only feature of the value of the objects traded.

Markets, like all other constructions, do not exist in a vacuum and like exchanges, practices and social organizations, markets are embedded in a number of different contexts. In this introduction to the field of second-hand valuation practices I have brought together quite different aspect of the field suspended between waste, consumption and exchange to describe how facetted a subject it is. In the following I will pick up most of the discussions I have opened up around values, practices and objects and the aspects I do not address directly have influenced the study and have helped define a direction through a number of related, and in some cases contradictory, discussions. Keeping valuations central throughout the study creates a structure and in order to provide clarity I have divided the analysis into different sections.

The Structure of the Thesis

The study presents a theoretically informed analysis of ethnography. The methodology and main theoretical framework is derived from an anthropological approach to ethnography. The study was carried out using ethnographic methods, and though some of the literature on second-hand touches different academic fields, they are all ethnographically based.

The thesis is divided into three main sections. In the first section I have addressed the literature in the field of second-hand in material culture studies focusing on objects, waste, consumption and markets. This introduction will be followed by a presentation of the research approach used in this study and the ethnographic account of my fieldwork in the CTS.

The second part presents the theoretical framework and the main analysis. The analysis is structured to provide an increasingly detailed analysis of the valuation process from organizational structure to encounters with individual objects. Therefore I begin by addressing the ways value is created through social practices of categorization and how structure is enforced to battle disorder. In the analysis I describe the forms of knowledge required by practices of valuation and define the valuation criteria. The second part of the analysis takes a closer look at the role of objects and analyses in more detail the way materiality, agency and objecthood are involved in valuation practices.

As an introduction to the last section I present an account of the continued trajectory the objects can take beyond the charity organization and into the global flow of objects. Using ethnographic data from an explorative field study of private wholesale and retail companies in Bangkok, I describe how the value creation continues to be a question of categorization as companies select and market the objects in more specialized markets. Finally, I bring these perspectives together to discuss the role of the thrift store in a global context.

The three sections address different levels of analysis and discussion: the level of social organization, individual socio-material encounters and the role of thrift stores in the global context of second-hand exchanges. The three foci therefore address different bodies of literature. The first section concentrates on the social organization of the CTS and how valuations are carried out in practice. I approach the subject through an anthropological theory of value and social structures, adding an economic perspective from Thompson, which has already been introduced in the ethnographic literature on second-hand. In the second section I bring my findings from the analysis of valuation down to a micro-level as I zoom in on the objects and their relations. The theoretical framework here brings the anthropological theory into play with ANT approaches to nonhuman actors, and I introduce a distinct perspective from object-oriented philosophy to address the agency of objects in valuations. In the third and final section I revisit some of the literature to reflect on the role of thrift organizations and object-orientation in the global flow of second-hand objects. Finally, I bring the three levels together in a discussion of the developments in second-hand markets to propose a critical reflection.

Chapter 2

Research Approach

The study of valuations in second-hand markets is the study of a particular kind of interaction between people and things. Without the material *stuff* there would be no valuation, and without the people there would be no one to perform these practices or to find them meaningful. The social aspects of second-hand markets have been the focus of several studies, from discarding to exchanges and consumption. Although most of these studies also deal with objects in some form or other, in this project I was determined to let the objects occupy a more central position. In practical terms this means that the role of the objects and their material presence has been the focus and that this priority has guided the theoretical inquiry as well as the methodology.

As I describe in the introduction, second-hand industries have primarily been approached from the fields of geography, anthropology, and material culture studies. In a social science tradition these studies have focused on processes and social practices and on how people live with things. My background is in the humanities, in visual culture studies, where objects and the use of objects is often approached through the cultural theory of representations and objects are considered relatively autonomous, i.e., 'the object' is separated from the practices of which it is part in order to allow it to occupy a central position as a cultural representation. I have thus questioned the exclusive focus on relations in order to let the objects 'speak'. My intention in this study has been to establish a middle ground that allows objects to speak and enter relations without reducing them.

Actor-Network Theory (ANT) provides a framework for inquiries that allow non-human actors to take a central position, but I am not convinced that an ANT inspired approach to how things live with people entirely resolves the tension. This study is therefore an open enquiry into the interaction of people and things which considers social relations to be the foundation of meaningful structures while remaining attentive to the role of things in these relations. In that sense the study is a material culture study. Although material culture as a field describes a variety of approaches, the collective interest in the interactions of people and things creates a commonality. Where material culture studies have been dominated by an orientation towards commodities, other aspects of people's lives with objects have increasingly been explored (Miller 1998). Anthropology has contributed widely and ethnographic inquiries have become a mainstay of material culture studies.

Ethnographic Methods

As Edgerton and Langness put it, the principle underlying the idea of fieldwork is that the best tool for studying a foreign culture is another human being's intellect, sensitivity and emotion (Edgerton and Langness 1974: 3). There are different ways of accessing such qualities as a researcher, but the core activity has always been participant observation (Spradley 1980, Van Maanen 1988). There are varying definitions of participant observation, but Dewalt and Dewalt offer a simple one when they describe such observation as 'a way to collect data in naturalistic settings by ethnographers who observe and/or take part in the common or uncommon activities of the people being studied' (Dewalt & Dewalt 2010: 2). Participant observation is often supported by other methods, such as structured and semi-structured interviews, pure observation, and the collecting and analysing of texts. Participant observation provides a situated and grounded insight into a particular cultural setting or activity and allows the researcher to experience what people do and how and why they do it. Participant observation is both a method of data collection and an analytical tool, and in my study I want to take advantage of both. I do not engage in participant observation only in order to create a holistic description of the particular organisation with which I work; I focus on the advantages of participating to provide an experience—and not only an account—of the practices involved, which highlights the physical, bodily and sensorial aspects of the practices I study.

Participant observation can take many forms, from pure observation to full participation. Different levels are suitable for different types of studies, but often, during the course of fieldwork, an ethnographer will engage in various types of activities with different levels of participation. As I started my fieldwork on the assumption that value is the relative distribution of human actions invested, the crucial point was that of understanding exactly what those actions might be. I eventually decided that a high level of participation was a good way of getting to grips with actions, but this realization took some time. When I found out that a volunteering position might be available, I quickly decided this would be an excellent approach. That the organization was willing to offer me so much instruction made the approach even more useful, and I describe this method as an apprenticeship. In the end I conducted far fewer semi-structured interviews than I had planned, while much more knowledge was gained through casual conversations, learning situations and practising.

Organizational Ethnography

> 'Given the reductionism of any method of inscription, choice of method reflects researchers' deeper assumptions about social life

> and how to understand it. Fieldwork and ultimately the field note are predicated on a view of social life as continuously created through people's efforts to find and confer meaning on their own and others' actions.' (Emerson et al., 1995: 10)

The methodological framework for this study is mainly derived from the field of business or organizational anthropology and ethnography. The development of ethnographic methods in the context of business and organizations provides a fruitful framework that highlights the social and cultural context of organizations (Moeran 2012, Garsten & Nyqvist 2013, Baba 2012). Anthropological ethnography developed as a method of describing 'whole worlds' and has insisted on the situated nature of all socialities. While organizational ethnography is firmly grounded in social anthropology, business, work and organizational life present settings that make complete immersion difficult since they often represent temporally or physically limited spaces (Garsten 2009). Business and organizational ethnography provides a discussion of methodological and analytical implications that are specific to these situations. Unlike other methodological approaches to the study of organizations, ethnography questions the boundaries of organizations by focusing on informal structures within the organization (Garsten & Nyqvist 2013). While organizational anthropology is considered part of social anthropology and shares many of the methodologies at the core of the discipline, organization anthropology has raised exciting questions about methods. Although Nader's call for anthropologists to 'study up' (1974 [1969]) was not directed specifically at organizational ethnographers, it had significant implications for the use of ethnographic methods in industrialised societies. Since then, other perspectives such as studying 'sideways' (Hannerz 1998), 'through' (Wright & Reinhold 2011) or 'at the interphase' (Garsten 2009) have been suggested in order to access complex structures and cultures. Similarly 'the field' has been questioned as a fixed geographical space by advocating instead for multi-sited (Marcus 1995) or networked fields. Although Marcus's notion does not only apply to the organizational field, it is especially potent in settings where traditional field studies are unavailable.

Methodological developments in organizational anthropology have been driven by the need to grasp highly complex organizational forms. The starting point for this study was not the organization itself but the practices of valuation. These practices are very much part of the social structures around the organization, though they are also bound by formal structures. The knowledge that goes into performing valuations is derived from within the organization as well as from wider experience of social and cultural contexts; however, the practices are performed inside an organizational form, both physically and socially. In order to understand the social in organizations, therefore, some knowledge of the formal structures is essential. As Garsten and Nyqvist explain, even though organizational ethnography approaches organizations through individual actions, corporations are more than the sum of their parts. A corporation becomes an actor in its own right (2013: 5). Through the production and dissemination of corporate ideology and normative ideals, it powerfully shapes the ways its members—its employees—think and act. It also moulds public discourse and practice through its public relations and marketing efforts, and contributes to the ideological transformation of the individual from producer to consumer. The individual methods I have used to conduct this study are all rooted in ethnographic traditions and have been developed for different kinds of settings. The organizational frame mainly serves to highlight the specificities that an ethnographer will encounter in this particular type of setting.

Entering the Field

Although the specific fieldwork that I draw upon in this thesis was performed in a certain place within a specific time frame, my entry into the dispersed field of second-hand markets started long before. Over the last six years I have been professionally involved in second-hand markets as a researcher and as an advisor to a large Danish charity organization. Together with Lise Skov and Sarah Netter, I conducted an explorative study of consignment stores in Copenhagen, interviewing shop-owners about their business, customers, valuations and other aspects of the practices involved in running a consignment store. A preliminary analysis of these interviews can be found in a report in Danish (Skov et al., 2011).

The research I undertook in Denmark formed my initial engagement as a researcher in the second-hand market. In addition, I collaborated with a Danish charity organization over a two-year period on how to develop new retail strategies for their second-hand shops and got to know the organization quite well in the process. While I was visiting shops, attending annual meetings and discussing with the directors and consultants in the second-hand department, I collected data on the practices of the volunteers, managers and consultants in the head office. I will present some of these findings in my final analysis, but mainly they constitute a form of reflexive comparison with the main findings from the Tavern Guild Community Thrift Store (CTS). Although the three studies of the CTS, the Danish charity, and the companies in Bangkok vary significantly in terms of extent and level of involvement, not to mention cultural context, they were all carried out using participant observation, interviews and photographic documentation.

The study in Denmark was my first engagement in the field of second-hand markets as a researcher, but I had already had plenty of experience as an individual. In the following I will elaborate on my role as an ethnographer with prior knowledge of the field and discuss how this helped me make sense of the findings and how I attempted to create or maintain a sense of alienation. In the US context, the geographical displacement made this easier, but mainly reflexivity and maintaining awareness of my role helped sustain a level of detachment. In practical experience, the fact that the employees and volunteers in the CTS would sometimes refer to my role as a researcher also maintained the distance.

Studying Valuations

As an advisor to a large Danish charity, I was charged with helping the second-hand department develop new business models and markets for second-hand retail. Both of these experiences took me inside a large number of stores, backrooms, basements and storage facilities, as well as providing me with many insights into the operation of second-hand organizations. With managers of the charity I would visit stores and talk to the store managers and volunteers as well as participate in meetings for managers, employees and volunteers. Through this work I first realised how many different actions are involved in bringing donations to market, and how individual are the valuations. The following extract of my ethnographic notes from a visit to one of the stores the charity runs just outside Copenhagen illustrates how many different actions are involved in the process and how interconnected they are:

> -On the day of the visit, 6 volunteers are at work, cleaning the store, sorting new donations, putting things in place and pricing new items. The shop appears loaded with stuff—clothes, books, records,

photographs, bags, teacups, lamps, soft furnishings—as well as volunteers. The store carries all types of products: women's clothing, men's clothing, children's clothing, toys, ornaments, tableware, paintings, books, music, movies, small carpets, jewellery and handbags. According to the manager, much of the shop furniture was left by the former hardware store that inhabited the premises until 1972 and much of it has not been replaced since the store was opened. The handle on one of the doors of the shop, which was previously divided into two shops, still bears the *Schou Epa's* logo of the former store. The division still characterizes the layout and it is only recently that a proper separation has been established between the kitchen and toilet at one end of the store. Due to the relatively modest conditions there is only a small back-office space, and the volunteers eat their lunch in the back of the store amidst the objects for sale. According to the volunteers, this does not prevent customers from accessing the goods, but serves as a social space where patrons can sit down and get a cup of coffee. The appearance of limited space can also be partly attributed to the ingenious use of the space, wherein broomsticks, picture-frames and old bicycle wheels are used as part of the presentation of the products. A large part of this use must be attributed to the volunteers' own creativity. Compared to an even smaller but newer store that I also visited, this store seems to stock all types of goods and presents itself as a treasure-chest for second-hand collectors. The appearance does not seem premeditated, however, and when I ask about the decor it seems to be a blind spot for the volunteers. It appears to be relatively unplanned, and besides a few new shelves that have recently been added, the racks and rails—and even the different product categories—have been in the same places for at least 18 years (as confirmed by a volunteer who has worked in the store throughout the whole period).

The volunteers who work in the shop have been assigned different tasks depending on their interests and abilities. Two of the volunteers come in once a week and dress the windows. The shop also has the benefit of ‘a guy’ who comes periodically and prices the books and paintings. The guy is not officially a volunteer and is not described as such (perhaps because he is not on the schedule?) but he has been consistently helping out for as long as the others can remember. Volunteers who live close by take care of washing while other volunteers repair things. And whenever volunteers happen to pass the shop outside business hours and see that some donations have been left outside, they always open up the shop to put the donations inside.

In addition to the shop, the organization has a full basement and a storage compartment in the building at their disposal. The only way to access the basement is through a hatch in the floor behind the counter, however, and the basement is therefore rarely accessible during business hours. The volunteers literally stand on the hatch while servicing customers. The steep staircase down to the basement restricts access and so some of the volunteers (who are all over 70) no longer go down to the basement. But other volunteers in their mid-80s went up and down the stairs several times during my visit.

All of the sorting of newly arrived donations takes place in the basement, where the volunteers sort and distribute the donations at a small table beneath the stairs. The first stage of this process sorts the useful items from the useless. The next stage divides the donations between what can be sold in the shop and what is to be passed on to another charity that picks up bags of functional but economically valueless clothing. Objects that have been too long in the shop without being sold may also be passed on, unless they are considered of such high quality that they can be saved for next year. Just like the shop, the basement appears crammed but incredibly well organized. All the different types of objects, including women's trousers (winter), women's trousers (summer), shoes, Christmas decorations, etc., have separate boxes that are turned around each season with 'winter' written on one side and 'summer' on the other. Buttons that have been taken off discarded clothes are collected in a cigar box, and particularly colourful or conspicuous clothes are gathered for window decorations. The basement is mostly the domain of the volunteers, except in cases where a customer wants to see the items stored in the basement (such as tuxedos). Due to the large volume of goods and the high level of organization, many of the clothes are folded in boxes and on shelves. To avoid the clothes appearing wrinkled in the store, they are unpacked and hung on hangers a week before they are presented in the store.

The clothes arrive in donated bags and are taken down into the basement and onto the sorting table, whence they are placed on a shelf, then taken down off the shelf and placed on hangers before

> going up into the shop. In the case of particularly good items, some later move back to the basement and onto the shelf. Although the shop also sells other things—e.g., paintings, books, cups, glasses, small furniture and suchlike—it is mainly the clothes that undergo this systemic circulation. On the whole, the store and the basement exude many years of embedded systems that have not been modified or rejected but in some cases have been supplemented by new systems. Despite the clarity and organization level, it seems to be a task in itself for the volunteers to make themselves aware of all the systems, although these systems do not appear incomprehensible.

This example makes it clear just how intricate and extensive a system some of these operations involve. Items are constantly evaluated, priced, re-evaluated, moved in and out of different contexts, recirculated and even perhaps eventually discarded—and all this within only a single shop.

The experiences I had and the observations I made as part of my work for the Danish charity played a significant role in developing the larger project, and especially the methodology. It became clear that studying valuation in second-hand markets would require an initial mapping of the structures, the trajectory that objects follow, as well as first-hand knowledge of the situated practices of valuation as they are carried out in interactions between people and things. The observations and experiences I draw upon in my description and analysis of the CTS are framed by my knowledge of other similar and different organizations, which helped me orient the study.

Following the Thing

> 'It is only through the analysis of these trajectories that we can interpret the human transactions and calculations that enliven things. Thus, even though from a theoretical point of view human actors encode things with significance, from a methodological point of view it is the things-in-motion that illuminate their human and social context.' (Appadurai 1986: 5)

Initially I followed Appadurai's notion that in order to understand the social entanglement of objects and people we need to 'follow the thing' (1986). During my primary analysis, I let the activities relating to the organization form the start- and end-points of the trajectory; but this trajectory starts long before, in production-lines, and continues through wholesale companies, recycling facilities or private hands. The organization, in my case, forms the methodological delineation, which is partly a reflection of the gap in the research between consumption and recycling; but the organization also provided stability in the context of the study of the flow of objects. Although the organization is not the object of study, it is highly important to be aware of complexities and to stay alert to the structures and flows within the organization as well as those that transcend organizational boundaries. The extended perspectives provided by organizational anthropology, as well as the ethnographic methods that go with it, highlight the complexities of practices in and between organizations. Ethnography, as Van Maanen writes, is '[…] the peculiar practice of representing the social reality of others through the analysis of one's own experience in the world of these others' (Van Maanen 1988:ix).

The main fieldwork for this study was carried out over a period of seven months, starting with an initiation phase during which I made visits to the store run by the organization and made contact with the managers in order to gain access. Over the following five months I carried out participant observation and semi-structured interviews in and around the organization as I worked in the warehouse for three to four days a week. Besides the observations I made as part of the apprenticeship, during the working hours I also hung out with the employees at social gatherings and during breaks. I returned to follow up a year later. This study was augmented by additional research over a longer period of time in Denmark working with a Danish charity organization and by an explorative study of wholesale companies and local vendors of second-hand objects in Bangkok. Given that the process of valuation does not end when an object leaves one organization, I followed the trajectory locally and globally in and out of different organizational contexts. In the last section of the thesis I will return to the onwards journey the objects take after they leave the CTS. The fieldwork in Bangkok was conducted in order to follow some of the objects as they leave American second-hand stores and enter the global market. In the final section I will expand on the global flows and the ways in which objects are recontextualized and revalued in other parts of the world, sometimes to return to their place of origin.

'Following the thing' addresses issues of interconnectedness between spheres of production and consumption. Through empirical investigation, the processes of commodification and de-commodification are mapped to reveal social embeddedness. Building from this, Kopytoff in a later chapter in *the Social Life of Things* (1986) suggests that social scientists should write 'biographies of things'. By following and describing the lives of things researcher will be able to understand not only their material conditions but their cultural inscriptions as well. Many studies of objects and commodities have been carried out following Appadurai's call to 'follow the thing' (e.g., Cook et al. 2004, Dwyer & Jackson 2003 and Ramsey 2009, Gregson et al. 2010). My approach was to carry out the study in this way in line with Gregson et al and to follow things down the value chain instead of up (2009: 847). They argue that following things to the end of their lives reveals 'the thing' as a problematic category: things are 'temporary configurations of material' (2009: 846). Not only does the thing move in and out of commodity states, it is also physically dissembled and reassembled along the line.

Appadurai's approach is widely used in material culture studies and is an integral part of the research design of my study as well. There are, however, certain issues that have led me to expand and adjust my approach, particularly regarding the materiality of things and the economic rationality underlying Appadurai's notion. Pinney (2005) challenges Appadurai's notion of the social life of things and argues that it reduces the object to the sum of its relations with humans: 'The fate of objects in the Appadurai […] accounts is always to live out the social life of men […]' (259). In other words, Appadurai softens the dualistic relationship between things as commodities and things as gifts by allowing us to consider things as more complex entities, yet he still insists that their meanings are inscribed by human agents even if things also have 'social lives' (1986:3). Pinney adds that the object and materiality should be more than illustrations in an analysis that finds its evidence by other means (2005: 260). David Graeber also discusses the implications of Appadurai's approach, which he views as an expression of economic reductionism. By focusing on exchange, he argues, Appadurai rules out the relational aspects of value in favour of things (2001: 30-33).

I take these critiques as a reminder that in an analysis of values in an organizational setting, the presence of objects should inform the analysis and not just serve to illustrate a set of values derived solely from social interaction with human agents. In practice, I realized that following individual things through the organization led to a form of judgement of the employees' ability to assess the 'correct' economic value of the objects. The explicit goal of the CTS is to raise as much money for charities as possible through the collection and reselling of used objects. My aim was not to carry out assessments but to understand the various regimes or concepts of value in operation. Cautioned by Pinney and Graeber and the practical implications of 'following' as a method, I decided to utilize the notion to conceptually structure the analysis and explore additional approaches in the data collection. I made the decision to work along the whole trajectory without following specific objects and instead to focus on the interactions between object and employee from a practice perspective.

Towards the end of the study I experimented with an extended method designed to grasp the instability of the relationship between employee, object, value and price—a method which combined observation and interviews. The method involved interviewing two employees at the same time while they were sorting and pricing objects. As they were going through crates of donations, sorting and valuating objects, I listened and recorded their conversations and occasional arguments about value and price. During the sessions I asked additional questions and made photographic documentation of the objects involved. The aim of this method was to gain access to explicit differences in valuations and to understand the reasoning behind these valuations. In this case, as in the rest of the study, the aim was not to assess whether the process resulted in the 'right' price; my aim was rather to gain an understanding of the different ways in which employees decide upon the value—or non-value—of an object. In many cases, the significant differences in the rationalizations behind these valuations nevertheless resulted in similar prices. The second reason for using this method was the ambition to get closer to the objects involved and question them as well.

Valuation in Practice

Objects move around a great deal within second-hand organizations; and these movements play an important role in creating or capturing value. Although the objects themselves are the ones being moved around, the movements are facilitated by employees and volunteers as part of a larger structure of practices. Studies of second-hand markets have often taken a particular type of object as their starting-point; in this study, however, my focus was on a practice that can involve different types of objects— the practice of valuation. Valuations as a form of social practice makes an otherwise intangible process accessible to social research (Moeran & Garsten 2013). In the literature valuations and evaluations are defined in a number of ways. Often the two terms are used interchangeably, but at other times they are separated to indicate monetary value on the one hand and qualitative values on the other (2013: 6). Here I use the term valuation exclusively, not to indicate a focus on monetary value, but to establish one term that refers to the practice of determining, creating, disseminating and assessing any number of values, economic or otherwise. As valuations are carried out they make visible the values that are at stake and they involve mental activities, actions and objects.

Practice then becomes the entry point to understanding how used objects become valuables. Practices, are described more specifically by Reckwitz as 'a routinised type of behaviour which consists of several elements, interconnected to one other: forms of bodily activities, forms of mental activities, things and their uses, a background knowledge in the form of understanding, know-how, states of emotion and motivational knowledge' (2002: 249–50). The decision to study any social or cultural phenomenon is usually based on the assumption that it is relevant as an example of something. Although many studies are carried out of highly singular events, actors, environments or communities, comparison and generalizability is at the heart of social science enquiry. Studying routinized aspects of what people do corresponds well with the aim of generalizability. At the same time practice perspectives also highlight the situated aspects of knowledge and enquiry, especially the types of behaviour social scientists study. The routinized aspects of practices, however, do not only refer to the iterative nature of certain activities but to the interconnectedness of actions, knowledge and context.

Practice theory is not a consistent theoretical framework but rather a set of perspectives or readings that 'present pluralistic and flexible pictures of the constitution of social life that generally oppose hypostatized unities, root order in local contexts, and/or successfully accommodate complexities, differences and particularities' (Schatzki 1996: 12). While other approaches focus on assumptions or discourse, practice perspectives place social actions at the centre of analysis (Halkier 2009). In the study of value and valuation, practice perspectives draw attention to the situated nature of judgements and valuations and address the fact that valuations are rarely based purely on economic rationality. Value is contextual (Moeran & Pedersen 2011, Graeber 2001) and valuations of used objects are highly localized processes combining knowledge of organizational values, knowledge of the customer base, and knowledge of the desirability of the object with a historical knowledge of previous valuations. As Warde and Southerton note on practices in consumption, such practices reveal that 'Consumption is more a matter of the use of goods and services than of purchase'

(2012: 10). Moving the focus away from purchase in the study of consumption is even more relevant in the study of second-hand practices.

Every social setting involves practices, and practices create and maintain social relations, structures and concepts. However, single actions and practices do not alter the social. The social is in that sense independent of individual actions. Practices are performative, and singular performances are sedimented into norms and structures. Practices such as shopping, cooking, eating, transporting, working and parenting are in this and other central definitions in practice theory seen as coordinated activities. Activities are doings and sayings that are coordinated by webs of a number of equally important and interconnected dynamics (Schatzki 2002: 77; in Halkier 2009).

The situated nature of practices, which have been explored especially from a feminist perspective (i.e., Harraway 1997, Butler 1993, Entwistle 2000), also highlights the partial perspective that any practice offers, whether these be the practices we study or the practice of studying itself. The partial perspectives and different realities (Mol 2002) that make up the social world do not lend themselves easily to methods and perspectives that seek to unify and streamline complex and sometimes opposing realities (Law 2004). Researchers enquiring into the social thus need to be aware of this multiplicity and of their own situatedness. By focusing on practices, I acknowledge that no study would allow me to exhaust the infinitude of information, knowledge and experiences available in this field, but that practices are a tangible yet complex expression of 'forms of bodily activities, forms of mental activities, things and their use, a background knowledge in the form of understanding, know-how, states of emotion and motivational knowledge'. Practice perspectives offer a mediating view between methodological individualism and holism by bridging the collective and the personal. From a practice perspective I also acknowledge the situated nature of my enquiry and the type of knowledge available to me without resorting to fragmentation or simplification. By focusing on practices, social enquiry abandons the strict empiricist paradigm that requires science to be disentangled from the social, as Law describes (2004), and accepts that the world is messy and that research must try to negotiate the realities, complexities and ambiguities.

Objects and Practices

Practice approaches have largely been defined by how they consider the role of material objects in practices, with some approaches highlighting routines, habits and competences, while others see the use of objects as integral to practices (Gregson et al 2007). Gregson et al. expand on the latter approaches—as exemplified by the work of Shove and Pantzar (2005) and Dant (1999). Gregson et al. extend practices perspectives beyond appropriation, and argue that the embodied nature of practices mean that they are transient and ephemeral.

> 'Indeed, that to continue to be a competent practitioner of certain practices might require us to get rid of certain artefacts and substitute something different, newer or more appropriate.' (188)

They distinguish between individual and social communal practices and argue that individual practices involve specific appropriation but also the disposal of certain objects. Building on this approach, I extend the focus on practices and describe another set of practices that discarded objects facilitate. For while objects, like embodied practices, can be transient, break down, decay and age, they can also be remarkably resilient.

Practices in Ethnographic Enquiries

Practice perspectives have implications for method as well. Historically, most anthropological fieldwork has had a clear orientation towards practices by the very nature of ethnographic methods; but certain methods are better suited for getting to know the interconnectedness of knowledge, memory, feelings and formal structures as they are experienced by actors in the field. A high degree of participation, for example, allows the ethnographer to experience the world they are studying and to experience what would otherwise only be conveyed visually and linguistically. In order to experience embodied aspects of valuation practices, as well as the mental engagement they require, I therefore conducted participant observation in the form of an apprenticeship.

Trial and Error

In order to perform the main study, I entered the organization as a volunteer and was trained in each section of the process, from donation to resale. By training and working as an employee, the fieldwork became highly participatory (Dewalt & Dewalt 2011). The organizational context allowed me to move freely between the different stations in the process, from receiving donations to reselling in the store, and helped me get in contact with customers and partners as well. Getting so involved helped me situate the study not only in the organizational context of the CTS but within the individual practices involved. Arriving at this method was partly a process of acquiring knowledge of the field and partly a matter of trial and error.

When I first set out to do the fieldwork for this study, I thought I would enter one of the large organizations such as Goodwill or the Salvation Army. I made contact with Goodwill and was met with a very open if slightly apprehensive response. Kirsty, the communications manager to whom I was referred, was very helpful and arranged for me to visit their large donation and sorting facility in the SOMA area of San Francisco. She also arranged for me to meet with the operations manager who would help answer any questions I had. Although I did not end up doing fieldwork in the Goodwill facility, the conversations, interviews and visits provided me with a valuable insight into the operations of a large sorting facility and helped me position my findings. However, as a site for a larger observational study it proved difficult. There was a time issue: setting up this meeting had taken two weeks due to all the clearance Kirsty needed to secure for me to enter the warehouse. She also needed to schedule a time when the operations manager of the warehouse, Louise, was available, since they could not let me enter without her. And because I wanted to visit all the different sites through which the objects move, I realized that this level of security could create obstacles later on. There were other access issues, too: both Kirsty and Louise had to accompany me the whole time we were in the warehouse, and Kirsty could not allow me to photograph the facility due to the employees' rights to privacy. In my initial contact with Kirsty and my conversation with Louise, I sensed it took quite a lot of effort to get across what it was I wanted to do and why. Although they were satisfied with what I told them, I still felt that they did not really see how I wanted to perform my study and that they still understood it as if I wanted to conduct interviews. Therefore the visit also made me consider my approach in terms of access. I considered joining the work programme that Goodwill offers, but realised the programme was too extensive and would not have allowed me to move around as much as my study required. I thus started looking for a smaller and more manageable organization I could work with and decided that a fully participatory approach would probably make it easier for me to enter.

Apprenticeship

Engaging in apprenticeships can actually restrict access to certain practices because the role of apprentice usually has certain limitations (Downey et al. 2014, Lave 1996). In my own fieldwork I ensured from the start that I could move around. I did this both by telling the managers that I would like to learn all the different tasks involved in sorting and valuating, and also by proving— through ‘doing a good job’ and paying close attention to my instructors and peers—that they could trust me to learn swiftly how to perform the task and not be a hindrance to the person instructing me. This inevitably compromised the level of engagement I had in each different station because I would move on or move around depending on where my help was needed or what I deemed it relevant for me to engage in. But because the CTS is a relatively small organization and the physical environment is small, I was still visible to the majority of employees on most of the days I was working there.

Following from my strong commitment to explore value as the importance of human actions, methodologically I wanted to get a close as possible to interactions between people and things in the process of valuation. Through the interviews I conducted I was able to access some of the structures, rules and knowledge as they were expressed to me; but assessing used objects is a project that requires skills and creativity, especially so as a result of the varied nature of the donations. The sorter constantly has to make decisions based on very little knowledge or experience regarding a particular object. The valuation therefore often becomes a matter of individual judgement, which was difficult for me to access and understand only through observation and interviews. Learning how to perform valuations allowed me to get a much closer understanding of all the aspects of the practices.

Ingold (2000) has described this type of role in fieldwork as a ‘skilled practitioner’, highlighting the participatory and experiential aspects:

> ‘the novice becomes skilled not through the acquisition of rules and representations, but at the point where he or she is able to dispense with them.’ (Ingold 2000: 415)

The learning experience of being taught how to sort and value used objects opened the field to me in new ways. I had previously made a good deal of observations and conducted interviews with other practitioners in other second-hand organizations, and I had had my own share of experience of shopping for used objects. Prior experience had given me an idea of the number of actions required to transform a discarded object into something marketable; but this experience had also demonstrated how intangible this process was. In general, the responses I got to my questions about how the valuation was performed were either very specific or very general. Learning to perform the valuations myself seemed to be the best way of accessing these specific forms of interaction between people and objects.

Like other ethnographers engaging in an apprenticeship as the method of their participation in a given field, I immediately felt the benefits of entering the field as a volunteer ready to be guided and taught (Downey et al. 2014). I was very open about my interest as a researcher, but across the board, from managers to sorters, this did not seem to be of any particular relevance to my colleagues and managers. If anything, it helped them quickly to come to terms with why I was at the store so much, since other volunteers usually worked only three to four hours a week. I also felt included in the work relationship since my interaction with employees was initially based on figuring things out.

Establishing Relations

Although being a foreigner in some cases represented a barrier, I felt it also allowed me to ask a lot of questions that might have seemed unnecessary and to be non-threatening to the other employees. In fact I only once detected a resistance to my eagerness to learn how to perform a certain task when I asked Drew, the manager of the book department, if he would teach me how to price books. He responded, 'Okay… but they won't let you price stuff, you know,' expressing some concern that I might be intruding on his territory. I assured him that it was merely a research interest, and he seemed to be okay with that.

During my time at the CTS I interviewed managers and employees, donors, customers and professional buyers, as well as representatives from partnering companies that collect the objects which the CTS cannot sell. I tried to move between the different departments as much as possible, working with most of the employees and asking them about their work, their backgrounds and other subjects arising in the course of casual conversation. They were all very kind and happy to supply me with information about their work, as well as telling me about themselves and how they came to work in the second-hand industry and specifically with the CTS. One of the most helpful and informative was Seth. Besides being one of the people who had worked at the CTS for the longest time, Seth had reflected a lot on the CTS and the second-hand trade in general. He ran the book department and quickly became my key informant and someone with whom I would have long conversations. Sometimes we would even get into friendly discussions about the CTS, reuse, recycling, living in the city, the gentrification of the Mission District, politics, and a number of other subjects. These conversations helped me contextualize my observations and make sense of the social and cultural environment, both locally and nationally.

Learning and Training

Being a kind of informal education, apprenticeship as an ethnographic method understands research as learning (Lave 2011). Learning how to perform a task which demands a good deal of individual judgement, such as sorting and valuating used objects, requires training and experience in local values. Sorting and valuation relies on knowledge of pricing structures, knowledge of organizational commitments and values, markets and other factors. Getting it 'right' is thus not something that can be judged by any external objective measures (as would be in the case of assembling something correctly, for example). The managers that trained me would therefore advise me at the beginning, then later correct me if I did it wrong, and then, as a last step before I was allowed to perform valuations and pricing on my own, they would sample my work by picking out a random item and seeing if they agreed on my valuation. At the end of this process, if they did not agree completely, they would tell me but would not correct the price or valuation, thus indicating the individual nature of these judgements and acknowledging my increasing authority in the matter.

Becoming Skilled in the Different Departments

The CTS does not run an official training programme. Most of the employees have a background in completely unrelated areas and are working in the CTS on the side. Most of the employees had not planned to work in the reuse industry but needed a job and ended up staying on. However, one employee, Kelly, had trained with Goodwill in that organization's work programme before coming to the CTS. Kelly has worked at the CTS for 13 years, almost as long as she has been in the States. (She was born in Peru and emigrated to the United States.) 'I love working here—people are crazy!' she told me. Before she started working here she worked for Goodwill in their training programme and learned how to sort and price clothes. When she had finished the programme, she successfully applied for a job at the CTS: 'They hired you once you had finished your training.' Because there is no formal training, learning to perform different tasks at the CTS happens informally. The requirements of the employees are not specific and they employ workers from very different backgrounds and with very different skills in terms of language and mobility. It seems that most of the work is performed based on casual or informal training, sticking to guidelines in some departments, and otherwise on trial and error. Getting it right is crucial, but also something that is constantly negotiated. Karen and Chet regularly have informal competitions about the right price and place for something: 'Chet is always trying out things,' Karen told me, 'I'll say "Oh, this has to be thrown away" and he will say "Let's put it in the 1$ bin and see what happens." Sometimes I win and sometimes he does.'

When I entered the organization and told Armun and Zack that I would like to learn how to work in all the departments, they paired me up with a manager from each of the different departments and let them instruct me. The managers had very different approaches, but mostly they were very casual. It was obvious that several of them had not considered their approach to teaching someone else what they did, though they were happy to show me. In all cases the training was carried out as part of their daily routine. I would tag along and watch and they would show and describe to me what they were doing and why as they carried out the task. Prompted by my questions, several of them tried to generalize, but mostly they would instruct me based on the individual valuations they were carrying out. In some cases my feeling was that the managers and employees were even a little surprised themselves at how difficult it was for them to make generalized statements about value and price—especially since they had no problem carrying out the valuation.

Embodied Learning

In the beginning I helped put objects on the shelves in the store. The objects had already been sorted and priced, so this was an easy way for me to get acquainted with the store and the systems of categorization by which the CTS operates. In the store everything had its place or at least its section. I quickly learned, however, that nobody minds or comments if you place stuff in the wrong section. All the employees and volunteers have their own systems, and in the beginning I put a lot of stuff in the 'don't really know' section. Through experience and training I get better at it, and fewer items seemed lost. After a while I became familiar with the categories and had assimilated their way of organizing the items. I experienced how this ability to find the right place for the objects created a sense of satisfaction.

Working my way through the valuation process allowed me to sense how the physical, sensory embodied aspect played a part in the valuations. In the beginning I made very conscious assessments based on what I had learned, but after a while I gained a certain flair for or sense of the right price. Other employees described this experience to me, so I started testing prices in my head when I picked up an item. Looking at it I would think '1 $?... 1.25 ?... 1.75 $!' and I would kind of know. It gradually became an embodied feeling. The knowledge you build, together with the confidence that experience gives, allows you to carry out the valuation quickly. But this 'system' does not necessarily guarantee consistency: when you come across another item similar to one you priced earlier it can be very difficult to remember or get exactly the same ‘feeling’ as the first time.

Other feelings played a part as well. Fatigue, for example. Although the employees seemed to be very conscientious about making the correct valuation and assigning the right price, when you have already set the price-gun with a certain price—1.25 $, for example—it can feel like too much effort to adjust it to 1.50 $ for another cup that is just slightly better. Fatigue also affects valuations in a different way: when you have been pricing for a while it can be nice to break the flow, e.g., when you pick up the item and weigh it in your hand trying to get a sense of it, you realize ‘Oh, I haven’t done 2.75 for a while—I’ll give it that price’.

There is a risk of losing the detachment that an outsider role provides in ethnographic fieldwork when you embark on a highly participatory route such as apprenticeship. Sustaining an overview of the field and the subject is challenged for the sake of immersion and embodiment. However, as others have noted, some form of immersion and proficiency in navigating social relations is always necessary (Downey et al. 2014: 2, Hastrup 1995: 17). The highly participatory nature of apprenticeships means that note-taking can be compromised; for example, since I was often involved in the practices I was describing I couldn’t take notes immediately. I decided that participating was more important and tried to get my notes down as accurately as possible as soon as I had the time.

As part of my research strategy I explored ways of zooming in on interactions between employees and objects in a number of ways. I have described my apprenticeship using my own experience as the lens through which to understand especially tacit and embodied aspects of the valuation practices.

Through the apprenticeship I experienced and documented many of these aspects, from a ‘feeling’ for an object and its price to the way repetition influences pricing strategy. Many of these experiences I used to identify similarities between my way of valuating and that of the other employees whom I worked with and observed. The length of the fieldwork also allowed me to gain this knowledge through experience and to engage in repetitive sessions of valuation and pricing, which helped clarify which practices were ordinary and which were more unusual. Working with the CTS for an extended period of time allowed me to reflect on the observations I made and take them into account in later interviews and conversations.

Questioning Objects

Learning how to perform valuation practices and then perform these practices allowed me to gain some expertise in the area. As a means of qualifying my own set of skills I developed a method of interviewing designed to identify other employees’ ways of valuating. By identifying other ways of performing the same tasks I was able to assess the differences and similarities.

In a sense, the method was also designed as a way of questioning the objects. Inspired by Actor-Network theory and other object oriented approaches I wanted to make sure that objects were not overlooked in the study. Throughout the time I spent at the CTS I experimented with different methods, and in the end I found that interviewing two employees at a time while they were sorting and valuating was the best way of making the objects ‘speak’. Prompted by my questions, the employees would engage in verbal negotiations with each other as they handled individual objects, making it possible for me to take notes of the conversations.

Records and Notes

The data was recorded in ethnographic journals consisting of notes on observations of practices, experiences of participation and recordings of semi-structured interviews (Spradley 1979) with managers, employees, donors, customers and partners. As part of my records I took plenty of photographs of the warehouse, of employees performing different tasks and of the objects that were donated and valued. I have used some of these throughout the thesis as illustrations or supplements to the written descriptions. Photographs are often used as ethnographic records, and even as analytical tools (Pink 2014). In this study I found that keeping track of the objects in themselves and not through photographic representations was difficult enough. I found questioning objects and describing their role in valuations so layered that a photographic approach would only add to the complexity. I have, however, used photographs as mnemonic tools in collaboration with records and journals.

In the next section I present my fieldwork in the CTS through an ethnographic account focusing on the practices of valuation.

The Tavern Guild Community Thrift Store

The Tavern Guild Community Thrift Store (CTS) organization is based in San Francisco. The CTS is a registered charity that divides its profits between more than 200 local charities. It operates like many other charity organizations in the US and in Europe by collecting and accepting material donations for resale, from which it generates all of its revenue. People donate their unwanted objects—clothes, furniture, homeware, art works, CDs, books, etc.—and the employees, some paid and some volunteers, sort, value and price the objects before they are remarketed. The CTS was founded in 1982 by a group of restaurateurs and bar owners in the gay community in response to the AIDS epidemic as a way to raise money for victims of the disease. In the beginning the organization only raised money for HIV and AIDS charities, but it has since expanded the types of charities to include animal sanctuaries, shelters, healthcare centres and many others.[6] The operation is run by 22 paid employees, managers and assistant mangers, and an executive director. The organization is located in a large warehouse on Mission Street in San Francisco where all its activities are housed. Donations, sorting and valuations are carried out in the back of the building, and the donated objects are sold in a large store which the organization runs in the front of the warehouse. The sorting area is closed off from the store, creating a clear division between the valuation and the retail space.

[6] A full roster of the different charities can be found here: http://www.communitythriftsf.org/charities/

The store has a large pink façade facing Valencia Street, one of the most popular streets in the area, with new stores popping up all the time. The area has undergone a gentrification process since the late 1990s when the area first became popular with tech entrepreneurs. After the dotcom burst at the end of the millennium, the gentrification slowed off, but has resumed and intensified in recent years, leaving the CTS in a central and highly coveted retail location. The area is now inhabited by a mix of people from all ethnic groups and income levels, a diversity clearly reflected in the store's clientele.

When visiting the store as a customer, you first enter a small entrance filled with notices, posters and free magazines. As you walk through the next door, the first thing you see is a long counter stretching almost half the length of the large space that makes up the retail area. Everywhere there are things are on display: the more expensive and fragile items at the front, near or behind the counter, while all other product groups are divided in their respective departments throughout the store. Beyond the counter area where customers purchase the goods they have selected, the different departments are laid out in order—from shoes, clothes, electronics to furniture, music, homeware and books. The products are clearly divided into the different departments, although there is a moderate level of disorder. In most departments there are rough sub-divisions. In the Electronics department, for example, the products are subdivided into lamps, phones, kitchen appliances, and music equipment, etc. However, products often end up in the wrong department, either due to the difficulty of deciding where to put them or because customers pick up things from one section and put them down somewhere else. As most of the employees and volunteers are busy accepting, sorting, filling up shelves, or servicing customers, not much time is allocated to clearing up the disorder on a day-to-day basis.

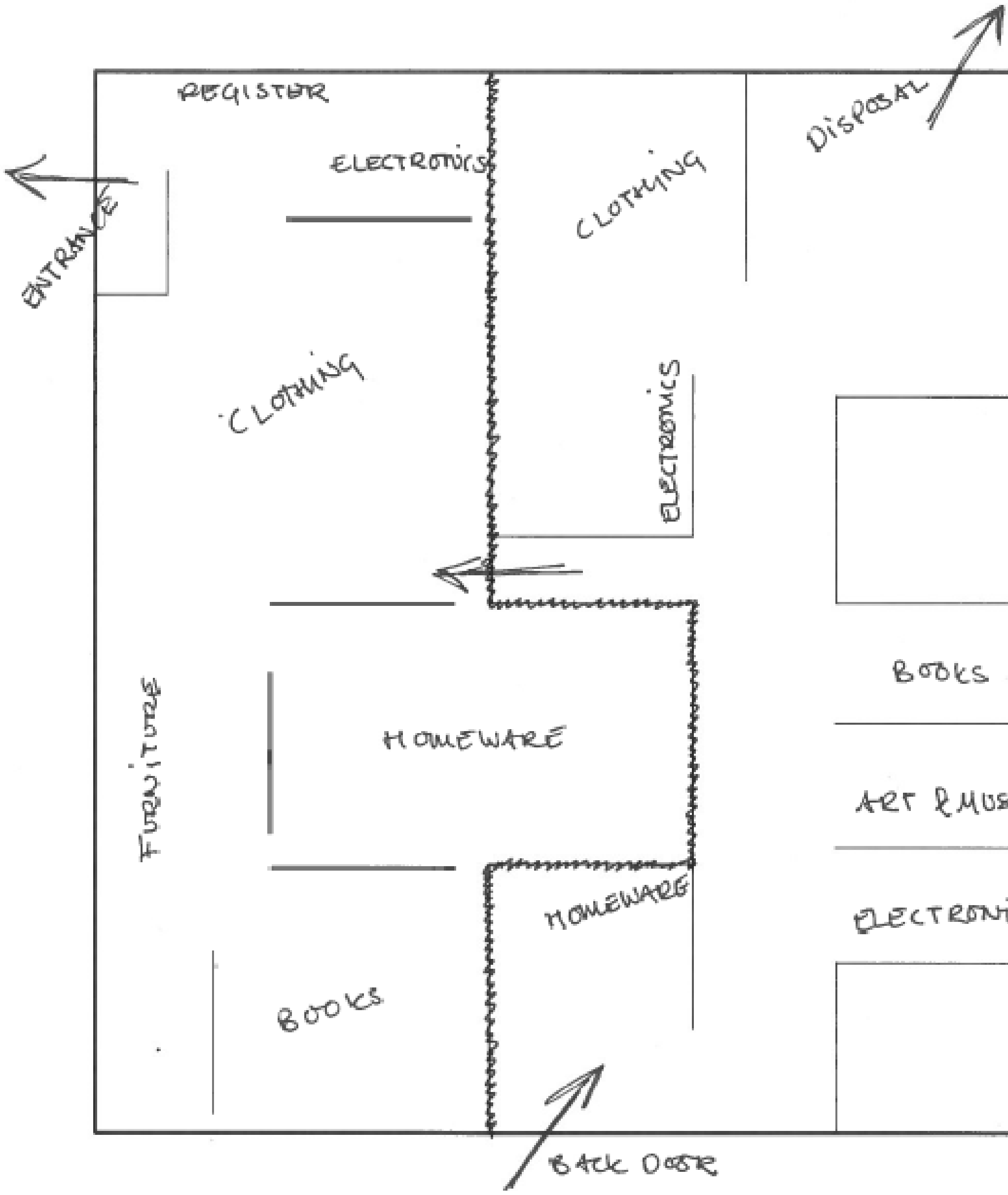


Figure 1: Floorplan of the Tavern Guild Community Thrift store

In every department, shelves and racks are positioned close together and packed with stuff, and the store easily holds thousands of items at any given time. To help clear out the stuff that does not sell within a short time, several sales are offered in the course of each month, the biggest one being held on the first Monday of the week, when everything in the store is sold at a 50% discount.

These sales are very popular and queues of customers for the register often stretch halfway through the store on these occasions. One employee, Karen, told me that sometimes people will even come in on the day before the sale and hide things between shelves in order to come back on sale-day to buy them.

The retail area covers approximately two-thirds of the warehouse; the rest is the back area where only employees and volunteers have access. The store has two entrances, and two further doors are located on each side of the building facing the two alleys on either side. One of these is used primarily for access for employees and for loading stuff for recycling into vans; the other door is the ‘heart’ of the facility, as this is where people drop off donations and where objects are received, sorted and priced.

Interior view of the store

The First Day

On my first day of volunteering I entered the store and the manager Armun[7] came and met me. It was a very casual introduction and we then went through the store to the back area through two curtains. Back there, employees and volunteers were working on sorting and pricing various objects. We went upstairs to a platform built under the roof of the warehouse. This is where Armun's office is located, which he shares with Zack, and there is also one more desk which Karen and Scott use occasionally. We sat down and Armun started telling me about the organization. After a quick introduction to the history of the organization, he asked how long and how often I would like to work. Normally, he said, volunteers come in for a minimum of three hours at a time. He gave me a sheet with the basic rules and guidelines to sign and we toured the premises, where I met many of the employees and volunteers. The people who work there are of all ages, genders and ethnicities. The majority are native English-speakers and others are not. I met the head of the clothing department, Meeta, and two of the guys—Ryan and Kaito—who operate the back door and receive the donations. After having stamped my time sheet, I was then dropped off in the book department.

[7] All names have been changed throughout

View of the book department

Drew, who runs the book department, has been working there for 17 years and works with one employee and a couple of volunteers. One is Mike, a retired book dealer who, as Drew informed me, is very knowledgeable. It is obvious that Drew likes his job, though he also feels he is struggling with the large number of books that come in. He immediately set me to work reorganizing a section of the shelves in the store to make room for new arrivals. Keeping on top of the order of the books in the store is beginning to be too much for the usual volunteer who puts out most of the books, so a lot of the books have been put up in no particular order. In order to sell the books, it is important that they are displayed in alphabetical order, so I began reorganizing. Mike was very helpful in handing me books and answering questions, but after an hour he left since he is also a volunteer. For the next couple of hours I was busy with the books and did not really talk to any of the other employees. But I was constantly surrounded by customers standing or sitting between the shelves as they browsed through the various sections. These many sections include sections for fiction, non-fiction, oversized books, spirituality, LGBT, children's books, foreign language books, books on how to become a writer, celebrity biographies, books on women's issues, cookbooks and books on social movements. Some of the customers were carrying baskets full of books and I was wondering if they were the booksellers that Drew had already told me about. The sellers are important customers because they take large amounts of stuff—and not only from the book department. There were many other customers in the department and some spent a long time looking and reading before leaving with only one book. As I was sorting through the books and removing the ones that had been there more than six months (as marked by a certain colour price tag), I was struck by how many copies of the same book there were. After having finished off the section and completed more than my scheduled time, I said goodbye to Drew and met another volunteer, Pete, with whom I would probably be working later on. I arranged to come back on Friday to do another shift.

Adjusting to the Organization

On Friday I arrived just when the store opened and was greeted by Armun outside the store. We went through the store and I punched in my card. Drew was already there. I talked to Armun about the different departments and he was very willing to help me work through all of them. During the day I was busy organizing books, as I had been on Wednesday. Spending quite a lot of time going in and out of the back, I noticed how people just seemed to roam around the back area. They all seemed to be doing something, but it was all very relaxed.

Zack, the guy I talked to when I worked there the first day, was there again today and we talked a little more. He has been working there for eight and a half years and is the operations manager. He said that about a quarter of the employees were long-term, while the others come and go. He told me that he and Armun worked together most of the time, but that Armun takes care of the financial stuff. I asked him whether it was a lot to keep on top of, and he replied that 'the store has been here for 30 years, so it's not like it runs itself, but… people know what is expected of them'.

Later I met Adam, the other volunteer in the book department, a very kind man around 60 years old. Before I was introduced, Zack came by looking a little apprehensive and asked what I was working on. He wanted to make sure that Adam knew I was there and what I was doing. Because people volunteer it seems the managers are very cautious not to step on anybody's toes. Drew had told me on Wednesday how he was not sure if Adam could keep up with it all anymore, but nobody seems to have talked to Adam about that problem. Adam seemed very in tune with the department and went around with a trolley putting up new books. Whenever customers asked him the whereabouts of an item he would guide them—as he guided me—directly to the item.

Over the next five months I worked my way through the different departments, learning, observing, talking and recording. In the following part, I present a more detailed description of the trajectory that most of the objects follow through the process of valuation.

The Beginning of the Trajectory

Figure one, as shown on page 77, is a schematic but comprehensive rendering of the physical structure and layout of the CTS. On it I have depicted all the departments and sections of the whole operation, and in the following I will describe the route which the various objects follow through the warehouse. The trajectory followed by the flow of objects takes them through of a number of ‘stations’ from donation to resale or discarding. The objects arrive as donations at the back door at the bottom of the figure and move through the different back stage areas to the front of the store through the register and out the front door following a sale, or return to the back area where the objects leave the CTS as discards, again in the top right corner. On several occasions I witnessed how objects that had left the CTS once through the front door entered again from the back in order to pass through once more.

Donor dropping of donations at the back door

The first station in the trajectory from donation to resale is ‘the back door’. The back door is located on the right side of the building opening onto a small street where vehicles can pull up and people can unload donations directly onto the dock. Inside the door, which is more like a gate, the donations go through the primary stage of rough sorting. Next to the gate there is a sign informing donors of which items the organization accepts and what it does not accept. Most of the time, two employees are stationed here to assist donors and perform the initial sorting. The donors are relatively involved in this process, since they hand over the donations directly to the employees. Most of the time this meeting is quite uneventful, but there are instances where these meetings become more engaging. The first day I worked at the back door I experienced some of the more emotional aspects of handling used objects:

> This first donor drove up to the gate with his whole car filled with boxes. They all contained his late wife's clothes and shoes. She had recently passed away and he was getting rid of all her clothes. 'It's hard,' he said, a little emotionally, as he dropped the first box on the ramp. I helped him carry the boxes to the gate and they were all marked with a description of the content of the box: 17 pairs of new socks, trouser suits, dresses, etc. He had also printed out an inventory of all the objects and noted the prices of all the things. The total amount came to over 5,000 $. Karen handed him a receipt that he filled out with his name, date, the amount and, at the bottom of the receipt, the name of the charity he wanted the money raised to go to. He wanted to donate the money to a women's shelter his wife had volunteered for from time to time.

Most of the encounters are less emotional, although there are instances where people become annoyed when they cannot drop off certain things. In these cases the employee hands them a list of other charities in the neighbourhood that do accept those items. When I experienced people getting annoyed, handing them a list always helped. However, Karen told me of situations where people have become quite offensive. "But when you explain why, most people understand", she told me.

Some donated objects are rejected and some are discarded, but most are divided into boxes, bags and crates to be taken to the different departments of homeware, clothing, books, art and music, and electronics. The first sorting does not entail any pricing, but it does involve an initial valuation in the form of decision as to which objects need to be discarded immediately and which of the remainder should go where. Homeware, luggage and 'look-ups'[8] stay in the homeware department while the other items are distributed amongst the different departments. 'Look-ups' are objects—usually homeware items—that are estimated to be more valuable and need to be inspected closely or looked up online. From here, other employees who specialize in different departments take over and sort the objects again. Based on this sorting, which involves evaluating the objects' condition, style and desirability, the objects are priced and placed in the different sections in the store.

At the backdoor the CTS accepts responsibility for donations regardless of their condition. Whether or not the objects can be sold, at whatever price, the organization now considers them their responsibility and deals with them in one way or another. This responsibility has several implications: most importantly, it means that everything that enters is thoroughly considered and every effort is made to make the objects marketable. The organization lives up to its name by being thrifty and making the most of donations. If the objects cannot be sold after they have been displayed in the store, or even if they have never been priced, they are either sold on in bulk to other organizations or recycled. Due to their sense of responsibility, the employees and the managers do everything possible to make money from the donations, and this attitude is ingrained in the organization's culture. This thriftiness leads, for example, to bundling together objects of little value, lowering prices, cleaning, testing, promoting and so on. Another example of

[8] 'Look ups' are donated objects that the employees suspect are more economically valuable and therefore require extra attention at a later time.

such thrifty practice concerns seasonal decorations: throughout the year the employees collect Christmas decorations, as well as Halloween and Burning Man costumes, and display them in the store at the appropriate time of year. The manager of the clothing department, Meeta, spends a lot of time sorting and pricing these things, and they are typically not priced very high. Often, Karen told me, they are re-donated after the festival or holidays are over and are stored for next year. Another example of this attitude concerns 'perishables', including objects like beauty products or foodstuffs that the organization does not sell. If an employee comes across this type of product amongst the donations, they will often save them in a special box for other employees to take home if they want to. Donated pens, tape, scissors and other household and office equipment are used by the organization instead of buying new equipment. The effect of this commitment to making the best possible use of all donations is to greatly reduce the waste generated by the organization.

After the rough sorting stage, the objects are taken to the different departments for closer inspection and valuation. As I will describe below, the different departments have different ways of performing valuations, but there are similar concerns for all of them. The most important feature in the valuation is the condition of the object, since most objects have to be in good material condition to be remarketed. In rare cases, the brand or name of the artist behind an object can justify its being remarketed despite flaws, but formal indicators like designer or label are mostly secondary to material condition. Desirability and demand is usually the next feature considered. Most objects will go out on display if they are not broken or flawed; though if they are highly sought-after they may still be remarketed with minor flaws. Likewise, if there are a lot of the same type of objects then some may be discarded.

Department	**Objects categories**	**Informants in departments**
Books	Books, magazines, catalogues, maps	Drew (man.), Mike (vol.), Adam (vol.)
Art and Music	Paintings, drawings, frames, decorative objects, postcards, CDs, DVDs, records	Cliff (man.), Thomas (vol)
Electronics	Household appliances, lamps, TVs, CD Players, cameras, phones, computers, chords	Ralph (man.), Zed
Clothing	Clothing, shoes, accessories, jewellery, costumes, bedding	Meeta (man.) Karen, Kelly, Chet, Liz
Furniture	All types of furniture except beds	Scott (man.), Dennis
Homeware/ Backdoor	Kitchenware, utensils, vases, office supplies, Christmas decorations, pet products, board games, storage boxes	Kaito, Ryan, Daniel, Brian (op. man.), Scott

Overview of the departments

The figure above lists the different departments and the employees, managers and volunteers working in each department. The departments in the back area correspond to the departments in the store, although in the store there are a large number of subsections within each department.

The trajectory represents a cultural and social transformation for the objects, but a number of physical movements are involved in order to bring about this transformation. From the backdoor to the different departments and the sales floor, objects are constantly moved around. The trajectory can be seen as a process of refinement with ever-higher levels of attention being given to details at every station. The stations are fixed while the objects flow through them. Employees move them from station to station, often prompted by a lack of space as more objects flow in. After their valuation in different departments, the objects are put in boxes or on racks once they have been tagged, ready to go onto the sales floor. In the next section I will expand on the work that goes into the valuation practices in the different departments and what implications the valuations have for the objects.

Working in Different Departments

For most objects that enter the CTS, the backdoor is the first step. Here the objects are sorted and put in boxes to be picked up by someone from another department to be moved along. For homeware, they are put against the back wall just inside the backdoor to be sorted. Once they are sorted, some may be moved to another box, like the ‘look up’ box or the knife box. From there, once they have been priced, they are put in another box and moved to the wall next to the entrance to the store. From here an employee will pick up the box and put the different objects on the shelves in the store. From here they are either brought to the front by customers for purchase, or ‘called’ and removed by another employee. They then go into plastic barrels in the back and are picked up by the recycling centre.

Putting out homeware was one of the first tasks to which I was assigned after I had reorganized the book section. This new task allowed me to become familiar with the different categories the objects were sorted into and how they were displayed in the store. It also allowed me to get to know the pricing of individual objects, since each object that goes into the store is tagged with a price. My task involved bringing boxes from the back to the department in the store, where each item is placed in the correct section on a shelf, crate or on the floor. In this department the sections include well-defined areas for cups, plates, drinking glasses and luggage, and separate creates for cutlery, kitchen utensils, candle-holders and objects related to pet care. The rest of the objects go into wider sections categorized as ‘bowls, serving dishes, roasting tins and related items’, ‘decorative objects’, ‘office supplies’ and several others. The contents of a box of homeware to be put on the shelves in the store can be incredibly varied. The following list describes the content of just one of these boxes:

1 porcelain coffee cup (1.5 $)
1 incense burner (1 $)
1 flask (2 $)
1 magnet with a support token from a breast cancer campaign (1 $)
1 umbrella (3 $)
2 decorative papier-mâché hearts (75 c)
1 vase (3.5 $)
1 tea strainer (no price)
3 odd candle-holders (1.5–2 $)

This is ‘typical’ content in that it includes a variety of objects. In here could also be more expensive items that would go to the front, but the really good items that go behind the counter are usually brought directly to the counter as soon as they have been priced.

The Electronics Department

After I had worked in the book department and in the homeware department, I was allowed to assist Ralph in the electronics department. This department is divided into two stations in the back area: one just by the back door next to the arts and books department and the other under the platform by the door to the store area. Ralph has taken over the second station. The station is approximately 5x3 metres in area and has a number of shelves and tables with electronic objects on them. There are also old pictures, records, bric-a-brac and other objects waiting for the right cables or leads to be donated or for Ralph to have time to repair them. Ralph has only worked at the CTS for just under a year, but he has settled into his routines and really enjoys the work. When a crate of electronic devices is brought from the back door into the department, every object is cleaned and tested. A crate can include anything from TVs to phones, memory cards, blenders, lamps, amplifiers, etc. CD players are plugged in and connected to speakers and PCs are connected to monitors and all content is erased. With coffee makers, they are only turned on: ‘no coffee is actually being brewed!’ Ralph tells me jokingly. He keeps odd plugs, bulbs, batteries and adaptors so that he can test any objects that come in without leads or cables. If the objects work they are priced, and if not they are either marked ‘as is’ and labelled as non-functioning, or are recycled. Customers who can fix them will buy the objects at a lower price, Ralph tells me. Odd cables, memory cards and other accessories are sold for approximately 50–75 c. He prices stuff based on his knowledge of what customers will buy, combined with a sense of 'What would I pay?', 'How new or old is this?' and 'What do we usually charge?'. Ralph will mostly price stuff at 'something-plus-25-cents', or 'something-plus-75-cents'. Prices like 8 $ are rare, he says, and so is 5.50. He is completely aware that this is a psychological matter, but still keeps to the 'principle'.

Having spent some time in the different departments, I cannot help wondering if the managers ever calculate how much time the employees spend looking things up and testing things—and all this for a product that ultimately brings in less than 5 $.

The Clothing Department

A dominant feature of this process from donation to sale is the number of individual practices necessary for bringing objects back onto the market. From the first sorting at the back door, the objects reach the different departments.

In the clothing department the clothes undergo a thorough inspection before they are priced and remarketed. First the employees at the backdoor accept the clothes (no bedding or children's clothing), then attach charity numbers and put the clothing in crates. These crates are then moved to the clothing department where they are sorted into usable items and recyclable items (or consigned to the 1$ bin). The initial inspection ensures there are no holes in the clothes and that they are clean. The usable items are stacked and the stacks are separated with a piece of tape indicating the different charity codes. Tags are then attached with the charity code on them and the clothes are divided into men's and women's. They are then moved again into subsections according to clothing types: jackets, trousers, tops, etc. From there they are priced individually and hung on hangers and brought to the shop floor.

The first time I worked in the clothing department, Karen showed me how to price designer jeans. She looked at the brand, and from her knowledge of what people want she priced them accordingly. Between 16–23 dollars is the average price if there is nothing wrong with the jeans. If they are a more popular brand and style they will go higher; if there is a small stain or they gyshow too much sign of wear, they will go for a lower price. Clothing priced above 17 $ is put in a special section and chained to the rack to prevent theft. The 17 $ mark seem to be important in the pricing structure. The 1$ bin, meanwhile, is where all the stuff is placed that is too good to recycle but too worn or stained to go in the ordinary section. I also performed pricing in the clothing department myself. The first time I did this I valued women's and men's jackets. The jackets had already been sorted and tagged with the charity code. I performed the final run-through, assigned a price and put them on hangers. They are placed on a rack that only contains items ready to go out into the store. In order to assign a price I examined the state of each jacket and determined whether it was a 'high end' brand. If it was not I referred to a list Karen had given me specifying the price-range of different types of clothing. The list is divided into categories of styles and brands. Women's t-shirts are priced between 2.50–3 $, though a vintage or brand T-shirt, for example, can go for up to five dollars. Outdoor jackets are more expensive, as are items from brands like J Crew, GAP, Jones of New York and others. While I was working on the jackets, Meeta came over to see how I was doing. He told me that one of the advantages of having different people doing the sorting and pricing was that different people see different things. On this particular day I found a few vintage pieces among the items I was valuating that should go in a separate section, as well as a few things with stains or tears. Using different people to value assures that more precise pricing is carried out.

The Ordinary and the Unique

Although much of the work involves routine tasks for the employees, every day something new comes in that needs special attention and requires the employees to spend time conferring with colleagues or looking the object up online. These special items can be many things. On one occasion, an old—almost antique—pewter thermos was donated. It was brought in inside a box with a lot of other objects and was immediately identified as something that had to be looked up. A few days later, when the 'look-up' box was full, Karen went through it and looked up the thermos online. I did a similar search and found it on eBay priced at almost 100 $. Karen decided to set the price at 32 dollars and 50 cents, which reflects the special status of the object, but still a significantly lower price than it might fetch online. This reflects the overall pricing strategy of the CTS. The aim is to price objects so that they bring in as much money as possible for the charities, but also with the aim that they should be accessible. Accessibility is considered both in terms of regular customers who may not be able to afford expensive items, but also to cater for professional buyers. Professional buyers make up a relatively large portion of the customer base and they generate a lot of income, as well as taking quite a number of items out of the store and thereby making room for new objects. The price should be low enough for professional buyers to want to purchase the items and be able to sell them on with a profit. In each department, objects that are considered more valuable are placed behind the counter in special cabinets or secured with wires.

Another case of a unique donation involved a significantly larger object—a set of decorated screens painted by a local artist. The man who runs the art and music department, Cliff, had looked up the artist and found several of the artist's works for sale at relatively high prices. None were as large as this one, he told me, but the fact that the painting was done on screens might potentially impact the price. The screens were displayed behind the counter with a printout of information about the artist from a website. When the screens had still not been sold a few weeks later, Cliff began considering putting them in an auction instead, at which time he moved the screens back to the sorting area and started calling auction houses. When I returned a year later I asked Cliff what had happened to the screens. He told me that the auction houses did not know how to include them in an auction so they were initially put back in the store at a lower price. He told me he had continued to lower the price until they were sold.

After working in all the different departments, my main area of interest quickly became the homeware department. The variety of objects there was astounding, although most of them were perfectly ordinary items. This variety made the sorting of these objects exciting, but also more demanding than in the other departments. Practically every object required special attention. I discovered that analytically this section could be used as a form of augmented representation of all the sections. Clothing, artwork, books and electronics all have their specificities, but there are many similarities. The homeware department demonstrates how issues of condition, style, usefulness and demand all play into the valuation of the object.

Even ordinary items like mugs, T-shirts and paperbacks need individual inspection and consideration to ensure their condition is up to standard. With most objects the condition has to be perfect. At the same time, because the organization has a strong commitment to generating as much profit for the charities as possible, the inspection and consideration of each object is taken very seriously. Everything that is donated is valued. One day when I was working at the back door with Scott pricing objects, I came across some office supplies that were left at the bottom of a box: some pins, a roll of tape, some post-its, pens, etc. I asked Scott if he ever priced stuff at less than fifty cents, because I had just priced a number of items slightly bigger and more attractive than these at fifty cents. He told me they did not and said I should 'bundle them together'. Bundling means finding a way to ensure the items stay together, either by securing them with tape or using one of the various sized bags they keep for the same reason. I made bundles of ten pens and an eraser for two dollars, or three post-it blocks, or three packets of staples + five pens. I then taped up the bags, priced them and put them in 'office supplies' in the homeware section of the store. As an expression of the thrifty approach adopted in the CTS, investing some time ensures the leftover objects become marketable. Over the six months I worked in the warehouse I heard again and again the statement that 'we just want the stuff to sell'. No one prices objects in the expectation that the items will hang around until the right buyer (maybe) turns up: the objects must move. This seems to be an underlying principle, just like the principle that the organization will try to raise as much money as possible from the donations they receive.

In all departments the objects are tagged with different coloured tags to make it easier to identify how long the object has been on display in the store. This information is used when employees 'pull' objects from the store after they have failed to sell within a certain amount of time. The objects are then either reduced in price, which requires a new tag, or discarded, in which case they end up in boxes or bags and are placed at the back entrance. These bags and boxes are then collected by companies that either resell or recycle them in various ways.

In the Store

Having worked my way through the back area, I was interested in working at the register as well. The counter area of the store is located at the north end of the store, just opposite the entrance. When customers enter, they pass by the counter where large bags are checked in. The counter is very long, about five meters, and holds three registers and an area with glass display cases. These cases contain jewellery: earrings and bracelets in baskets, watches, smaller vintage items like silver spoons, baseball cards and metal lighters. They also contain items that need to be handled carefully, such as scissors and carving-knives. On top of the glass cases is another display case with a lid that opens, which is used to display silver or gold jewellery. On the last part of the counter, connecting the front to the wall, there is also another glass case where cameras, camera lenses, mobile phones and other more expensive electronic equipment are placed. All the items in the case are only taken out at the request of customers. Usually only two of the registers are manned, and during less busy hours the persons operating the registers will also be responsible for checking in bags and taking out items from the cases. If the store is busy there is an extra person operating the last register and checking in bags. At peak hours a fourth person will be there, helping out, checking bags, taking out items and keeping the back tidy. The fourth person will also answer calls on the intercom or call people out from the back if a customer needs help in the furniture department or wants to try on an item of clothing displayed on one of the mannequins in the window. The person will also call for assistance if a customer wants to try on leather or designer clothes, as these are secured by wires to avoid theft. At very busy times, up to three extra people are working in that area.

Behind the counter is also kept a ‘take back’ basket. This is where the people at the registers will place items that customers have brought to the counter for purchase but have decided against, or things they just brought up to ask about. Normally this basket is emptied out the following morning, but if it is a particularly busy day someone might be called out to empty the basket during the day.

Helping customers with the items at the counter allowed me to observe another aspect of handling used goods that is also time-consuming. When someone asks to see a camera, you take the cameras out and place them on the counter. Most of the time the customer wants to see several cameras in order to be able to decide and compare. This is a lengthy operation mostly because the customers cannot test the cameras so they have to examine them closely to check for flaws. Some of the digital cameras come with chargers, but this also takes time due to the need to plug them in, replace the battery and turn on the camera. The same goes for phones. In that case, customers can check if the phones turn on properly, but not if they actually work with a plan. A lot of the customers buying electronics are return customers who know the drill. One of the regular customers comes in often and looks up the online value of the cameras on his phone. He hangs out in a corner, typing in style numbers and marks on his phone, looking to see if he can make a profit on any of the items.

A similar process is involved when someone asks for the basket of bracelets. Some customers will go through them only cursorily, probably deterred by the number of bracelets in the baskets. Some, however, spend up to 15 minutes going through them meticulously, picking up every single bracelet for inspection. Some of the customers who do this are return customers, while some of them are dealers seeking vintage items for resale. All the while, an employee keeps an eye on the baskets.

Although I did not operate the registers during the five-month period I worked at CTS, I did observe the selling process. When a customer wants to buy something, the employee inspects the price-tag which has the price and the department number printed on it. The different departments have different codes and the clothes have separate subdivisions that are also expressed in numbers. The price-tag also has a charity number, referring to the particular charity the donor of the item has decided to support. This number is translated into the name of the charity on the receipt given to the customer.

By hanging out near the register I was able to observe the last stage of the trajectory of the objects as they leave the CTS. Most of them go out without any interference, but some, especially the more expensive items, are reduced in price if they are to be sold to a returning customer or if a customer buys more things at once. One day, for example, Armun gave a 25 % reduction on a clock he sold to a customer who was also buying two speakers. Armun told me he gave the reduction because the customer was going to buy the speakers and because the clock had been sitting in the store for three weeks. In some cases the objects only leave the store temporarily. Some of them return because people no longer have any use for them and decide to re-recycle, while others return because some of the customers shop in the store as a form of hobby. These customers spend a long time browsing for things they want. They buy objects, sometimes every day, and then re-donate them. Sometimes the stuff comes back with the price tag on it showing that it was bought earlier that same month.

Zooming in on the Practices of Valuation in Action

Training and working in the different departments gave me an embodied understanding of what valuations entail and how formal indicators and tacit subjective knowledge, as well as sensations, emotions and energy levels, all play a part in the process. Most of my observations were grounded in these experiences, but I also used additional tools and methods to clarify how my experiences related to those of other more experienced sorters. Interviews and conversations were the main tools employed, but I also conducted sessions of joint interviews during the sorting of individual objects as they were donated. I have described the methodological considerations in a previous chapter, but here I want to zoom in on the content of the interview sessions to describe in detail what valuations involve. The following is a sample of the process:

> Zack, Scott and I sat down in the homeware department and looked at the box in front of us. The first object Scott took out of the box was an Arabic-looking metal teapot. It had a plastic ring round the top of the lid, which Scott removed to make it look more attractive. He said it didn't really affect the price whether this ring was on or off, but he removed it anyway. Zack agreed on the price and Scott put a pink price tag on the teapot indicating the monthly colour code and stamped with the price and a charity code, in this case 176, which indicates that the object has been donated to raise money to Safehouse, a local charity dedicated to providing housing to homeless women who have been involved in prostitution.
>
> The second object was a handmade wooden candleholder. It was made of real wood, which Zack noted was important, and it had a 'mid-century

modern' look to it, although it was not marked. Scott and Zack both considered it special and so the final price was set at 4.25 $.

Next were four martini glasses which Scott and Zack considered to be quite nice but nothing exceptional. They were priced at 2.25 $.

Right after, Scott pulled out another set of martini glasses. They were longer than the first four and generated some debate back and forth, since Zack thought they should be priced the same as the first four glasses while Scott insisted that they should be priced higher because they were longer and more attractive. In the end Scott won the argument and they were priced at three dollars each.

We went through a number of other objects, amongst which was a set of French glass plates. According to Scott they were valuable, but since they were scratched he did not want to put a high price on them. Zack, on the other hand, would not have them put in the store at all and discarded them immediately because of their condition.

One of the objects: metal teapot

Devaluation: 'Calling' Old Things

Objects that have been for sale in the store for a certain period of time get 'called'. This means they are taken off the floor or re-priced. In the homeware department, the limit is four months, though this can vary depending on the quality and price of the item. Most of the items that have been in the store for this long are sent for recycling, while a minority are revalued. Unlike the clothes and books, most of the homeware items are not recycled as goods but are sold to recyclers to be ground down for raw materials. If the employee doing the 'calling' estimates that the item is still of some worth, it is usually reduced in price by around 50% and left in the store. The new price depends on a lot of factors: it is always an individual call. If the item is considered good enough to keep, it gets a new tag with the price, department, and charity code. Most of the items I called during my time at CTS were reduced in price by between 50 c and 2 $.

The homeware department

Last Stage of Commoditization

Objects that have been discarded during the valuation or after being 'called' in the store are collected in bags and boxes and put in a corner in the back area, to be picked up by other companies that either recycle them or sort them again to see if there is anything of value. The donated clothes that go to recycling are those that have turned out to be too dirty or in too poor condition. There are also items that have been in the store for a long time but haven't sold. These clothes are all put in plastic bags and are picked up several times a week, for which the CTS gets a receipt. The company that picks up clothes for recycling brings the bags out of the other side door opposite the backdoor. The two men who come are only employed to collect the clothes so they do not know a lot about what happens to them afterwards. I later talked to the company to find out what they do with them. A company called Bay Rags pays the CTS per bag. In just one weekly pick-up I observed them pick up 45 bags of clothes. Armun told me that getting paid for the clothes was a big change from earlier when they used to have to pay to get someone to take away the discards.

I observed the pickups of most of the different types of objects, from pottery to clothing and books. Some books are discarded due to their subject. There are some objects that just do not sell. Some are discarded because of duplication: certain novels, especially, are so numerous that there is no need to add another to the collection. For example, we received copies of *The Shipping News*, *Under the Tuscan Sun* and *Eat, Pray, Love* on an almost daily basis during the time I worked with CTS. These are the books that are discarded before they hit the store. Others are discarded when volunteers make rounds removing books that have been out on display for more than six months, which add up to a fair number. 'I try not to get rid of stuff that might sell, but you have to throw some things away,' Drew says. Like all the others working at the CTS, Drew is highly aware of the organization's principle that they want to make as much money for the charities as possible, so that getting rid of stuff that might sell is a difficult decision. Since the company that picks up the books pays by bulk and not by value, there is no need to throw out sellable stuff.

All the books that have been discarded are boxed and left in the hallway. Once a week, a man called Stewart comes by and picks them up. Stewart works for the company Green Street Books and drives around the area picking up discarded books from some ten places similar to the CTS. He pays the organization for the books. He comes in through the back where he pulls up a truck. He was very chatty and happy to talk to me: ‘Do you mind if we talk while I get these books in the truck?’ he asked, and I walked with him as he was loading nearly 20 boxes onto the back of the truck. While he was loading he also told Drew all the latest news and gossip from the second-hand books trade. A lot of it was about the salary level of some of the CEOs of other larger charities, and about who had changed jobs and other things like that. I was not sure that Drew was all that interested, but Stewart did not seem to mind. He just wanted to tell the stories.

While Stewart was loading I asked him some questions about the work he does and about the company he works for. Because of the way the interview was carried out, I was not able to record the conversation as such, so the following is a summarized account of the information he was able to give me, supported by information from the company’s website:

> ‘Green Street Books collects and recycles used and donated books for re-sale for the purpose of impacting the lives and environment in the footprint area of where collections are made and never outside of our local community. By partnering directly with local non-profit groups we are able to provide jobs in the local San Francisco area and support and fund dynamic community groups as well as saving unused books from landfills. Our primary funding is towards local community urban farming. Urban farming establishes local grow areas in disused and vacant lots and provides organic, nutritious fruit and vegetables to local low income families at no cost.’

The company collects and sorts the books and sells as many as possible online through Amazon—around 16,000 titles at any given time. They are developing their own software to sell through, but at the moment they use

Amazon's. They donate the books they cannot sell to schools, libraries, social services, NGOs and other organizations that need books but do not have the funds to buy them. The company is run as part of a software company and is funded in combination with the software development. The books themselves are not profitable enough to support this operation. During the time we talked, Stewart expressed a lot of animosity towards other charities that operate in second-hand markets. This animosity was expressed in different ways and concerned different aspects of the operations. As I have mentioned, he did not like the salary structure of the larger operations. And he seemed to see most of the work that some of the charities do as a well thought-out business plan and less altruistic than they would like to appear. 'Do you know that they pay some disabled workers as little as 36 cents an hour?' he asked. Stewart also questioned the environmental responsibility of their operations. He claimed that some organizations ship books they cannot sell to the state of Washington because of the different environmental legislation in that state. He explained that Green Street delivers the books they cannot sell to a local company that repulps them. He was also dissatisfied with how little the other operations were able to reuse: according to him, 85–90 % of the donations were recycled instead of reused, whereas Green Street only recycles 30%. Stewart seemed very enthusiastic about the work he was doing, and very knowledgeable about the trade in general. It also seemed that a lot of his passion for the work was fuelled by proving the others wrong and creating a better way of doing things. Where he obtained all his information about the other operations from I could not get him to disclose, but he was very passionate about making the best use of the old books.

Boxes of books waiting to be picked up

Impurity and Dirt

Throughout the CTS, matters of physical cleanliness and safety are addressed through a number of signs and practices. Almost all the sections have specific safety and hygiene measures. Following the trajectory followed by the donated objects, the first measure is the large sign facing the back door informing donors of which items the CTS cannot accept. The sign has several purposes, one of which is to ensure that no soiled or dirty linen or blankets are donated, nor any kinds of duvets and pillows. Just next to this sign is another sign directed at the employees sorting the donations, bearing an enlarged photo of a black widow spider to inform the employees about the different kinds of spiders they might encounter amongst the objects in the boxes of donations and which spiders they need to beware of. In the time I spent sorting I encountered numerous spiders, but luckily never a black widow. Spiders are not the only type of insect the CTS are looking out for. One of the reasons they do not accept bedding is the potential risk of bedbug infections. Just before I started working there they had a bedbug ‘scare’ in the furniture department, though this turned out to be a false alarm. All soft furniture is checked meticulously before being allowed to enter the store, and if the employees handling the piece of furniture are in any doubt, the object is rejected. On one of the walls in the back area is a large poster carrying information about bedbugs, alerting people to the dangers of bedbugs and reminding people to be on the lookout.

The most common pollution that employees encounter, however, is dirt, including soil, dust, grit, food stains, etc. In the book department, mould and mildew are the biggest issues. Since people often leave their discards in carports or cellars, many of the boxes have attracted moisture, which affects the books. Some employees wear gloves, at least for some jobs, though not for the majority of jobs since gloves impede your ability to feel the object. Most of the employees never complained about the issue of dirt, and most of them did not consider it a major problem. The issue was addressed by some employees indirectly, however, in terms of their workwear. Employees have to wear clothes they do not mind getting dirty. Ana described the ‘risk’ that the employees put themselves at indirectly as we were talking one day about customers and reviews of the store online on sites such as Yelp. She told me she had read someone saying: ‘all the hipsters working at the CTS get all the good stuff’. She disagreed and said that many people she knows find really good stuff in the store, but added: ‘I don’t think people realise how much we have to sort through, like crap and mould—we deserve to get some good stuff once in a while!'

Chapter 3: Values and Valuations

How is Value Created in Second-hand Markets?

In this chapter I analyse my ethnographic findings based on contemporary literature about values and valuations in material culture to address the question of how value is created in second-hand markets. Reaching back through the anthropological literature on commodities and gift economies, I build a framework around David Graeber's formulation of a social, relational concept of value that puts human action at the centre. In order to structure the analysis, I take Mary Douglas's seminal work on categorization as a starting point and argue that practices of valuation constitute a process of transformation. To support the analysis, I introduce theoretical concepts from ethnographic literature on values, second-hand markets and valuations. In some instances I compare my observations with related studies to address empirical as well as theoretical points.

The Value of Things: Gifts and Commodities

Values, as a set of guiding beliefs as well as a measure of worth, are a complex subject to study. The word itself describes a number of things: what is ultimately good; the degree of desirability in objects; and, in a linguistic sense, 'meaningful difference' (Graeber 2001). Even if one is more specifically interested in the value of things, different levels of values interact. There are symbolic, social, ethical and economic values—and even objects that are traded, i.e., commodities, carry more than one type of value. In classical economic theory, Marx and others have argued that the exchange value of a commodity is measured by the labour spent on producing that commodity. Exchange value is not the only type of value a commodity has: as Marx notes, commodities 'are only commodities because they have a dual nature, because they are at the same time objects of utility and bearers of value' (1976 [1867]: 138). Utility in itself constitutes a type of value in objects or commodities, but other, cultural values are also at play. Brian Moeran has argued that values are never inherent and that it is human interactions which define what values are at stake and how they are measured (2009). He identifies a number of different values and argues that together they constitute something that can be exchanged into economic value. It becomes evident that what in fact has the most influence on value, and ultimately the prizing of most things and commodities, are social, cultural values. For example, it is the reputation of a designer that determines how their designs are prized (and valued for that matter).

Commodities continue to be valuable even after being exchanged, and through use they acquire new value as their initial economic value diminishes. Through use, things are re-appropriated, which can also have an effect on their value. Moeran describes how things may have an intentional use or designated function but may in practice often be used for other purposes for shorter or longer periods of time. Putting a book under the leg of a table that is unstable or arranging flowers in water pitchers both constitute diversions from the intended uses of the objects. In the use phase, the use value of an object is also a vital aspect of its value, since use or function can be many things. As Moeran (2009) points out, besides practical functions the function of an object can also be to be looked at. An object can have a variety of functions and uses and may have several functions at the same time. Some of these functions may even be conflicting. A sock is not merely for putting on the foot or for hanging from the mantelpiece at Christmas; the function of a sock is also to express the stylistic choice of the owner, to give work to a number of people in factories and in retail. Some of the functions of an object may be considered as types of value rather than as functions *per se*. The relationship between an object and the people who produced it is not the first thing that springs to mind when you think about the use of an object; but disregarding this relationship as a use property of an object is too simplistic. For example, many socks never make it to the foot or the mantelpiece but are discarded, either by dissatisfied receivers of Christmas presents or in storage clear-outs. Even those instances do not remove all functions from the objects, since they may be picked up by second-hand dealers, donated to charity or sold to recyclers who shred them to stuff sofas. When objects move from first- to second-hand markets, their use affects their value in even more ways.

Historically, the relationship between used things and economic value has been described as devaluation as a result of age. Except within the budding trade in antique objects from the 19th century onwards, only recently have old things been considered valuable to an extent that the value of certain old objects surpasses that of new counterparts.[9] In most cases, old things are reused for the same functions as they were intended. However, this is only true according to a limited understanding of function, for the stylistic function of the object has changed, and its lifestyle function is likely to have changed too. Although Williams and Paddock remind us that compartmentalizing consumer motivation is simplistic, the social and emotional attachment to used goods can be very different for different users (2003). If economic constraints are the primary reason for

[9] The most striking example of this is perhaps the exorbitant auction prices furniture by certain designers reach. In most cases vintage pieces become far more expensive than a similar piece of furniture produced today.

purchasing old things, the joy of acquiring may be reduced by a product's being in less than mint condition. On the other hand, if purchasing old things represents a lifestyle choice, the used object may immediately be imbued with much more emotional value. These feelings will often differ from those of the first owner, giving the object a whole new function in the life of the new owner. The question is whether this constitutes a re-appropriation, since the function has changed, and therefore alters the functional value of the object even if it is *used* according to its original conception? Arguing whether stylistic or saleability constitutes a functional value or an appreciative value may be a moot point. However, it points to the difficulty of distinguishing categories of values, emotions or motivations when dealing with things and cultures in motion. In second-hand markets use constitutes value both as utility, as an aesthetic expression and as a social distinction.

The Marxist Tradition

Although use value is not the same as the value of used things, use as a type of value in itself would seem an important starting point for an exploration of the value of second-hand objects. A theory of use value has been a major contribution of Marxist economics that has influenced anthropological value theory throughout the last century. In Ricardo's understanding of value, which to a large extent underpins Marxian economics, the use value of a commodity is determined separately from the exchange value (Milios & Economakis 2002). This distinction has to some degree persisted, but the specific circumstances in second-hand markets question whether this relationship absolute. Are there no instances in which use value becomes a prominent component of exchange value? In a simple sense, use value may be the last option for people to realize some kind of exchange value from a commodity. Even if the commodity is not of great quality, or if it does not have great symbolic value in terms of branding or heritage, at least if it is useful it may be exchanged for a small amount of money. In other cases, use can become an aesthetic value, as with certain antiques, carpets, etc., and so feeds into the symbolic value of an object or commodity. McCracken has written extensively, for example, on the value of patina (1988). In conventional understanding, however, use is still more likely to have a negative effect on the value of an object.

In the Marxist understanding of value, labour provides the common property by which value can be measured (Milios & Economakis 2002: 8pp). How, then, is the value of used goods valued? Is the value the same as in the first exchange? Does the value remain unaltered although the buyer has already exchanged the labour value for money? Or is the value calculated on the basis of the labour expended in handling the goods in collection and sorting? In that case, the very sorting process itself creates the value of the object, not by assigning use, aesthetic and ethical values to the object but by the very act itself. The purpose of this chapter is not to present a Marxist analysis of second-hand exchange, and presenting the labour theory of value as a simple calculation of time spent would not do the theory justice. The point here is that many concepts of commodity value focus on production, and acquisition as the determining events. By doing so, the value of used and second-hand objects becomes difficult to assess. By defining value as inherent and determined by the amount of labour invested, the act of producing becomes fetishized. As an expression of wider cultural bias towards newness, production as the formative value-creating event may partly account for the widespread cultural resistance to used goods that is and has been predominant in many parts of the world.[10] Conceptually, however, it also encourages a view of the process of sorting as a value-creating event—even as an act of production. From a Marxist perspective, there is an ethical commitment to human creative powers (Slater 1997: 3), and through the understanding of labour as the measure of exchange value, the value of used things materializes in front of our eyes. By picking up a certain object, scrutinizing it for flaws, determining colour, assessing size and condition and placing it in a certain category, the value 'becomes' in that moment. But the very act or labour of valuating lays bare the contextual nature of value. The labour itself would not exist if not to perform this determination.

Determining values, or at least how value is created in a social setting, requires a wider understanding of the different ways in which the values and practices involved in establishing that value function. Economic assessment is not the only practice that is involved in valuations, and the practices are embedded in a socio-cultural context. In order to understand this context, the social value of objects must be scrutinized as well.

Gifting Commodities

The study of values and exchange in material culture has historically described the object of value as either a commodity or as a gift. This distinction divides the properties of an object and its value between economic market-based exchanges on the one hand, and relational, social exchanges on the other. Anthropologists have been occupied mainly with gift economies and have discussed the social value of highly unique objects drawing on Marcel Mauss's accounts of Melanesian exchange relations (2000 [1990]). In anthropological

[10] Although an extensive historical account is beyond the scope of this thesis, the distinction between old and new as a cultural construction adds depth to the conceptualization of the value of second-hand objects.

theory this distinction was traditionally part and parcel of a division between different types of societies, but with the development of contemporary anthropology the rigidity of the division has been questioned by a number of scholars (e.g., Miller 2000, 2001; Myers 2001, Herrmann 1997). One of the most influential attempts to bridge this division is found in Appadurai's introduction to *The Social Life of Things* (1986), where he describes how things can move between different regimes of value along the trajectory of their social lives. In the same volume, Kopytoff (1986) describes how 'biographies of things' may help shed light on their transient nature. Miller (2000) criticizes the distinction from a slightly different angle, arguing that the dualism between the market and contextualized exchange (gifting) is nonsensical. All exchanges are contextualized; however, this does not only mean that markets are framed by culture but that markets also produce culture (2000: 78–79). Recently, David Graeber (2001) has offered a theory of values by reaching back through the Maussian tradition and arguing that value, as a cultural, relational phenomenon, is utterly social in both market and gift economies. In an attempt to create a new path away from a widespread economic rationality, Graeber argues that what people value are social relations, not the objects themselves. In doing so he presents a concept of value that resists fetishizing the object, which may have great consequences for the study of valuation in cultural production.

Second-hand objects make visible the composite nature of objects as gift-commodities. Appadurai's concept of the social life of things is sensitive to the instability of commodity states. Pursuing the complexity in the exchange of objects, Annette Wiener has expanded on the inalienable nature of certain objects (1992), while Fred Myers and Webb Keane have explored the complexity of the emotional and cultural attachments that determine the inalienability of all objects

(2001). The idea of something being inalienable, outside of exchange, is a pertinent consideration in the relationship between people and used things. In Wiener's case, the inalienable character is derived from what the object has been imbued with through its attachment to the owner, while, as Valeri (1994) points out, in Mauss's theory of the gift the identification is also with the receiver. In accordance with anthropology's preoccupation with the social, the power to make objects inalienable lies in creating and maintaining social relations, not in the objects themselves. As I am particularly interested in the role of objects, figuring out where all this leaves the objects is of particular interest. Heirlooms, as a more everyday kind of inalienable possessions, share properties with objects that are exchanged in second-hand markets. David Graeber describes the value of heirlooms as 'always … an historical value, derived from acts of production, use, or appropriation that have involved the object in the past' (2001: 105). Building on the Maussian tradition, Graeber makes very clear what role the object and its material presence has in this relation:

> '… in the case of heirlooms, the value that makes the illusion of agency possible derives from that very history, real or imagined. In any case, energies that went into creating the particular form of the object and made it desirable are displaced; they come to seem a ghostly agency that guides its present movements. The object of desire becomes an illusory mirror of the desirer's own manipulated intentions.' (Graeber 2001: 105)

This characterization of value is part of a larger theoretical project in which Graeber attempts to draw the concept of value away from economist objectification and towards social practices.

Seeing the value of objects as created by social action establishes a common concept that is sensitive to the features of both gift and market economies. The study I present here is about organizational practices in second-hand markets, but the exchange of used objects is by no means limited to formalized, commercial systems of trade. Many objects are exchanged within families or groups of friends, some are swapped and others are sold privately through flea markets or websites. Thrift stores run by charity organizations, which are the subject of this study, represent a middle ground between commercial and private exchange in what could be described as a mixed economy. Most of these organizations operate with donations and employ both paid and volunteer workers. Although the overall aim of these organizations is to generate money for their charity work, many of them consider other aspects of the operation as also being valuable. For some, helping people get access to cheap household products is a priority, for some the social aspects of volunteering are important, while for others the environmental benefits of reuse are valuable. These aims often go hand in hand with economic goals and make the valuation of donated objects a complex negotiation between different regimes of value. To consider the objects only as commodities would be to overlook important features of the valuation process. Establishing a concept of value in second-hand markets therefore requires a common denominator.

Graeber: Value as the Importance of Actions

In his book *Towards an Anthropological Theory of Value* (2001), Graeber presents a critical reading of the theories that have shaped the understanding of value in cultural theory over the last century. Building on this reading he presents a concept of value that places human actions at the centre, as a response to what he sees as a reductionist economist rationality that has spread to theories of value over a number of fields. At the centre of this rationality is the assumption that value is established by people trying to minimize their effort and maximize their yield and therefore relies solely on self-interest. This approach is not only cynical but also a false assumption about human nature that does not hold sufficient explanatory power. As Graeber argues: ‘if you are sufficiently determined, you can always identify *something* that people are trying to maximize’ (2001: 8 (original emphasis)). In order to establish a theory of value that does not fall back on self-interested calculation, Graeber demonstrates that what is valuable is not the object but the social action around it. Building on the Maussian legacy around gift-economies, he argues that the value of objects is contextual—not in the linguistic sense of ordering in systems of objects, but rather in their relationship with people. Marilyn Strathern (1988) is one of Graeber’s main references in the neo-Maussian tradition and provides the foundation for a concept that bridges gift and market economies.

Graeber’s aim is to shift the focus of value concepts away from fetishizing objects towards the relationality of value:

> ‘Commodities have to be produced (and yes, they also have to be moved around, exchanged, consumed…), social relations have to be created and maintained: all of this requires an investment of human time and energy, intelligence, concern. If one sees value as a matter of the relative distribution of *that*, then one has a common denominator.’ (Graeber 2001: 45 (original emphasis))

The common denominator Graeber talks of is between economic, market-driven exchanges and gift-like exchanges. In line with other critical readings of the separation of the two types of systems, he argues that only human actions and the relations they create establish a commonality between the two. Against the fetishizing of objects by economists, he gives examples of how, in fact, what is being traded in markets is not so much the thing in itself but the right to use it.

In a mixed economic setting such as second-hand stores, bringing the two aspects of exchange together is important. As Graeber describes, value is something that is created in the act of exchange and the act of exchange becomes performative—as does every action involved in creating the value of an object, whether that value is economic or otherwise. Considering value as the relative distribution of invested human time and energy provides a framework that enables analysis to focus on both formal exchange values and other types of value, such as emotional, sentimental or community value. It also emphasises an aspect of valuation that is tangible, namely that of human action. Singular actions and actions organized into practices are the dominant objects of analysis in this study, and they link the study theoretically and methodologically. Graeber's theory builds on the developments in anthropological value theory especially Strathern'(1988) and Munn's (1986) work and presents a coherent framework for various types of exchanges. By focusing on the importance of actions the contextual and ambiguous nature of second-hand exchanges become accessible.

Establishing Values in Second-Hand Markets

Limited attention has been given to valuations in second-hand markets, but a few studies of reuse and second-hand industries have shown how systems and categories help organizations create hierarchies of worth and re-establish discarded objects as valuable (Botticello 2012, Gregson et al. 2010). In particular, Nicky Gregson, in a number of articles with different co-authors, has addressed the issue of value both in local markets and global flows (e.g., Gregson et al. 2000, Gregson & Crewe 2003). Other studies of value in material culture have focused on objects as they circulate beyond their first owner in cases where the object is of a highly unique quality (Myers 2001, Wiener 1992), or on objects as part of consumption (Miller 2001b). These examples provide valuable insights into the specificity of value processes, and Weiner's argument that most cultures hold *inalienable possessions*—objects that carry all of their biography with them—is important in the case of used things. The intimate relations people have with things make parting difficult, and even though the organizations role is to sever most of the intimate ties, some are allowed to remain. Unigue as well as ordinary objects are exchanged in second-hand markets and requires a cohesive theory of value. Graeber's concept makes it possible to embrace the value of unique as well as ordinary objects.

Rubbish Theory

One of the only economic theories of second-hand markets is Thompson's 'rubbish theory', and as such it is often referenced in studies of second-hand markets. Thompson suggests that objects, as products of consumption, inhabit one of three possible states as valuable objects: transient, rubbish or durable (Thompson 1979). In order for objects to become durable, meaning that their value increases over time and that the objects have indefinite lifespans, they have to pass through a 'rubbish state'. The rubbish state is a state of no value that nevertheless carries the potential for the objects to become durable in economic terms. The theory is useful for conceptualizing the trajectories of objects within second-hand markets since many objects follow a similar route: from acquisition to use in the home, to ending up in the back of a cupboard for a period of time until they are possibly rediscovered and regain economic value as antiques. Parsons (2008) suggests that rubbish theory helps conceptualize the phase between two states in the life of things because it describes the possible transfers that objects may undergo. As Parsons point out, Thompson does not offer any examples of the practices that are involved in the transfer from one state to another, and she calls for empirical studies to describe such practices. One example of such practices is the transformation of rubbish into commodities in charity organizations. My ethnographic findings show that second-hand organizations handle objects of transient, rubbish and durable value. In other words, the process of transformation is not synchronized with the states of value that Thompson describes. As an economic theory it addresses abstract structures, and although the practices of valuation show a more complex image, rubbish theory supports the claim that the value of used things lies in social categories more than in the objects themselves. In the analysis I will therefore pursue a focus on the practices—the actions—involved in creating value in these markets from rubbish to commodity.

At the level of social organization, the following analysis is focused on how practices, consisting of both bodily and mental activities, different forms of knowledge and the use of things, produce value in the field of second-hand exchanges. Drawing on a relational concept of value centred on human actions and sense-making, with an orientation towards the interaction between humans and objects, I develop an analysis of valuation in second-hand markets from Douglas's structural approach. I describe how rubbish or discards become valuable through categorization practices. Based on my ethnographic findings, I argue that the trajectory followed by objects through the organization transforms the objects from discards to commodities by practices of categorization and individualization. Secondly, I describe how different values compete and collaborate to establish a valuation of the donated objects. I present an analysis of the criteria by which the employees assess the objects and how these criteria are mutually exclusive in some cases and collaborate in others. Leading to the second part of the analysis, I demonstrate how disorder and ambiguity, a condition of the organizational form, creates obstacles and opportunities for value throughout the structure and is bound to the materiality of the objects.

Categories of Value: Analysing the Practices of Valuation

Practices are the main focus of this project. Attention to what people do has guided the choice of methods and shaped the theoretical framework. The following analysis is also structured around practices focusing on routinized aspects of valuations: bodily activities, forms of mental activities, or sense-making, as well as different forms of knowledge. An important aspect of the practice approach defined by Reckwitz (2002), and the specific focus of this study, is the role of things and their use in practices. Therefore I have devoted a separate chapter to the analysis of objects and their role in valuations, which follows after this chapter. Although a defining feature of practices is the interconnectedness of activities, knowledge and objects, the separation only serves to provide clarity in the analysis. As the theoretical framework demonstrates, value is a social phenomenon and therefore I begin with an analysis of activities, sense-making and the knowledge that goes into practices of valuation at the level of social organization.

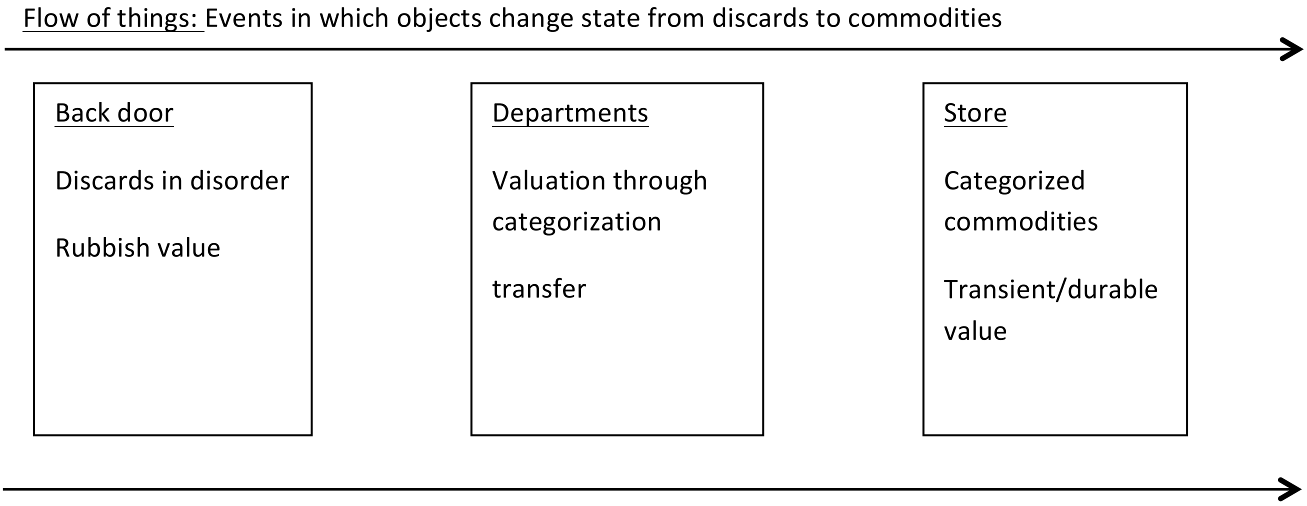
Matter out of Place

In order to perform an analysis of the trajectory from donation to resale, an understanding of the structure is important. Following Douglas, making sense of second-hand objects is mainly a matter of categorization. Dirt is matter out of place; thus categories produce dirt. As Botticello has described, by turning the process around and categorizing dirt or discards, the sorting process creates order and the potential for value (2012). Before the sorting begins, the piles of donations are unrecognizable as commodities and carry very little value. In this study I follow a similar approach, examining the flow of objects through the organization and beyond. The initial analysis I will present here carries the structural approach further to describe the trajectory as a transformation through categorization.

Categorization as a practice creates a structure through the organization. This structure is relatively stationary since the different employees inhabit different stations throughout the organization. The mobility is in the objects. The trajectories that the objects follow highlight the instability in the lives of things. And in the CTS there are several possible trajectories. Appadurai (1986) describes a flow of objects, and in the CTS this visualizes the way objects move. A constant flow of objects pass through the organization, and at intervals the flow is structured by categorization practices. I use the term trajectory to indicate an intention in the projected route the organization sets out for the objects. By establishing trajectories the organization attempts to manage the constant flow. The particular interference the structure imposes on the flow are the actions that transform the discards into commodities. As Kopytoff (1986) describes, writing biographies of things can help make sense of the instances where things change states. The analysis I present here offers an augmented view of this event in 'the life of things' where the objects change from one state to another. What happens inside the CTS is an event with several possible outcomes. As Graeber, Miller and others note, the dichotomy between gift and commodity as completely separate states is too simple. In the CTS the objects arrive as gifts in one sense, as they are donated to charity, but they are also potential commodities. Otherwise the

CTS would not accept them. They are also potential rubbish, since nobody knows if the CTS can make money on the donations.

Value through categorization in second-hand markets



Rubbish in Disorder

Thompson describes the rubbish state as a 'region of flexibility' (Parsons 2008: 390) which allows for different outcomes. The employees enforce a structure that aims to categorize the rubbish and turn it into valuable objects. The rubbish state at this point is the dominant one from which the donations can become commodities that can facilitate the original gift of the donor. In the way Thompson describes rubbish he is very clear about the possible transfers that can happen. Objects in the transient state can turn into rubbish in order to become durable. In Thompson's view, transfers occur between transient, rubbish and durable states in that order. Objects do not move from durable to transient or from rubbish to transient. He addresses very specific types of objects, and in a wider use the states need qualification to be applicable. The CTS mainly handles objects that Thompson would define as transient, namely household goods. Therefore the durable state in this analysis includes objects that have been reinstated as commodities, whether durable or transient. In the CTS the categories are less defined and some objects are donated as transient and continue as transient even after the valuations. Also, durable objects such as artworks and antiques are donated because of their value even though they go through a rubbish state. I will return to more specific examples of how these transfers happen, but the ambiguity has led me to describe the donations as discards instead of rubbish. I use the term discards because it can refer to objects that are considered rubbish as well as objects that are considered valuable but have been discarded by their previous owner anyway. Either way, the donations arrive because they have been discarded and are physically and categorically in disorder. The disorder, or being out of place in Douglas' terms, is a potentially powerful state and, as I will demonstrate later, preserving or allowing some degree of disorder is valuable. However, the primary action which the donations activate is categorization through structure.

From Disorder to Structure

The back door, which forms the initial station in the flow, constitutes a liminal space for the donations within which their value is highly volatile. They have been stripped of their former identity and have yet to be assigned a new one. First they are deemed suited or unsuited to enter the organization. Some are refused access, either on formal or specific grounds. The large sign at the back door denoting the acceptance policy of the organization provides formal indicators to which the employees can refer, but in some cases they have to make ad hoc decisions about condition, state or spatial limitations. The donations go through the first crucial stage of categorization at this point, from discard to potential commodities. The employees, literally the gatekeepers of the process, make swift but significant decisions about the suitability of the donations, albeit at a superficial level at this point. Most donations arrive in bags, boxes or crates, and the decision is made partly on trust, asking the donor what the donation includes, and partly on quick visual estimates. The process here is a negotiation of a number of variables: accepting as many good items as possible (to raise as much money as possible); not accepting objects that cannot be sold and need to be recycled without having been marketed first; and not spending too much time deliberating over the decision to accept the objects or not. The types of objects that are donated are incredibly varied and they often arrive jumbled together in a box or a bag. The disorder is a matter of categorization: it is still unclear what objects are in the box and to which department they belong. Disorder is therefore also a matter of value, as any number of the objects may be valuable or worthless.

The primary task of the employees is to make sense of this disorder through practices of categorization. The systematization is clearly expressed in the structuring of the work tasks involved in sorting and remarketing the objects. The clear lines of operation ensure this structure and help employees make fast and accurate judgements about the objects. The pricing strategy also expresses the drive to systematization. In the clothing department, the strategy is supported by written descriptions of different types of clothing, with notes on specific brands and a suggested price range for the different types and qualities. Unlike clothing, where a high degree of categorization is possible, other departments like ‘art and music’ and ‘homeware’ are not subject to the same simple categories. In these sections the valuation is based mainly on experience and the objects’ relationships to other similar objects become even more important. Everyday products like cups or coffee pots in one section and paperback books in another are often valued in relation to other objects: e.g., this cup is more interesting than that one, or this coffee pot is bigger than that one. The categorization is first and foremost a practice through interconnected bodily and mental activities involving different forms of knowledge as well as various objects. The categorization is a way of making sense of the donations and turning them into commodities.

Practices of Valuation

Repetition is crucial to valuation as to other practices. As 'a routinized type of behaviour which consists of several elements, interconnected to one other: forms of bodily activities, forms of mental activities, things and their use, a background knowledge in the form of understanding, know-how, states of emotion and motivational knowledge,' (Reckwitz, 2002: 249–50) practices are at once individual and collective.

The structure I have described in the previous chapter rests solely on the systems of routinized actions that the employees and managers perform. These actions organize objects and social relations and are in themselves organized. The different practices are also interconnected. Single practices have no meaningful effect on the overall system unless they are aligned with other practices and/or reiterate other meaningful practices. Practices are always unique and at the same time a repetition of previous recognizable practices.

As a single action or even a set of actions, a valuation is not rooted in a wider structure of meaning. Through the interconnectedness of the organization, the individual and the social context, valuations are stabilized. In valuation practices this is an important point: single actions do not produce value; practices, as routinized and socially accepted actions, do produce value. Valuation, the process central to organizations that operate in second-hand markets, has different features that suggest it belongs to a number of different types of practices. Thompson describes the process of moving objects from one state to another as a transfer (1979). He focuses on structural processes, but as the transfers in the CTS involve a number of practices and actions I expand the term and describe them as a transformation instead. The objects move as part of an active engagement and the categorizations make the objects recognizable as commodities. In that sense, the term transformation better indicates the activities and the change that is involved.

The Powers of Transformation

One day when I was working at the back door accepting donations and pricing homeware, one of the regular donors pulled up. Ryan obviously knew him from before and I later found out that most of the employees knew him too. He pulled up in his truck and opened the trunk. He took out five boxes and put them on the dock. They were full of assorted knick-knacks, cups, glasses, plates, a few ceramic vases and other household items, all of which the CTS accepts. 'This is for the bird sanctuary,' he said, 'as usual'. Ryan started putting tags with the charity code on the boxes and pulled the boxes over to the back where the sorting area is while I asked the guy about the donation. He has been coming to the CTS for a long time donating stuff, but also occasionally buying. He has been involved in the bird sanctuary for a long time and is very passionate about the work they do. 'I go to a lot of flea markets and estate sales and buy stuff. A lot of boxes like these. In most cases there are a few items of real value in them, so I sell those to cover the cost of the whole box, and then I donate the rest to the CTS. They are able to sell the items and make money out of them to donate to the sanctuary.'

This example demonstrates how the donor is able to take advantage of the transformative powers of the CTS to generate money for the bird sanctuary. Any objects that he does not believe he can generate a profit on as an individual he turns over to the organization to let them do so. The routinized practices of the organization enable him to benefit from the process. The CTS has gained authority over a long period of time amongst the donors and customers, who trust the organization to perform the task of turning donations into commodities to be sold for profit for charities. Utilizing the powers of the organization to turn discards into commodities also indicates that, while the overall structure from disorder to categorization creates the main value trajectory, the relationship between the analytical categories is fluid. Thompson argues that objects need to pass through the rubbish state to regain value in second-hand markets, but the example above questions whether this is the only path the objects take. The donor is perfectly aware of the donations' potential value and does not consider them rubbish. Nor does the CTS consider them rubbish; if they did so, the donations would be refused at the backdoor. The former owner from whom the donor got the objects may have considered them rubbish; but, as the donor told me, in most cases he pays for the boxes of objects. This either means that the objects can pass from transient to transient through the CTS without ever being considered rubbish or that rubbish needs to be defined differently. Broadening the definition of the state of 'rubbish' by describing it as 'discard' makes room for a larger variety of flows, but in this particular case the objects may not even have been discarded: the former owner considered them valuable enough to demand money for them and the donor agreed to pay. Even though he only paid for the objects in the boxes he could sell, he still considered the rest valuable enough to donate to raise money for charity. And since the employees at the backdoor accepted the objects, they also must have considered them valuable. It thus seems the objects were never considered rubbish. In the larger flow, as Appadurai describes it, this does not present any real disruption: no transformation takes place and the objects simply remain in a commodity state. Thompson's theory, however, does not provide the necessary tools to account for the specific processes. Douglas and Denegri-Knott & Parsons describe how the disorder that exists prior to categorization is also a space of possibilities. Disorder is not the same as rubbish, but it carries similar traits because the donations as a whole are potential rubbish until they are categorized.

The practice of categorizing an object is transformative in that objects are transformed from discard to commodities through valuation. The transformation is unstable in the sense that objects can easily return to the discard state, but it is permanent in that the objects are now second-hand objects.

Stability in Practice: Activities and Knowledge

Although there is no formal training programme at the CTS, the important information and knowledge involved in valuations is passed on through verbal and written communication, and even more explicitly through negotiations and discussions. As Armun and the other managers told me repeatedly, they strive for uniformity and structure in pricing and in quality. This means informing the employees of what sells and what does not; but the communication of common measures mostly happens implicitly through routinized daily activities. The department managers also operate the register at some point during the day, which allows them to see what customers buy, and in the different departments managers and employees develop systems together. In some cases they write them down for reference. Uniformity is achieved through these negotiations, but it is always a question of overall uniformity. In individual practices, uniformity is hard to achieve. As I experienced first-hand when pricing items in the homeware department, it can be difficult to remember the exact price you assigned to a similar item on the previous day or even an hour earlier. The number of items and their variety makes it difficult to use exact memories as reference points. Instead, the practice of relying on a sense of the object—as I have described earlier—seems to be just as valid a method of creating consistency. Over time it becomes easier to make similar judgements, and because most cups are priced fairly similarly, for example, any difference is usually small. However, even when you begin to stabilize your own judgements, your individual judgements are likely to be slightly different from the next person's. Complete consistency in pricing and in the assessment of the condition of the items that are put in the shop is therefore difficult to achieve. The stability that is created over time relies on routine.

Individual Judgements

One of the things that struck me time and time again throughout the period I spent working at the CTS was the amount of labour that goes into transforming the discards into commodities. I have described many of these practices in the presentation and in this analysis, but I do not think it can be emphasized enough just how many individual practices are involved. Most of these are organized and are part of the overarching formal structure that enables the organization to perform transformation. These include the practices described to me through interviews and the ones that the employees described to me without necessarily performing them at the same time. These are numerous in themselves, but on top of (or maybe underneath) the formal structural practices are a myriad of informal ad hoc actions that are vital for the success of the process. At the back door, these ad hoc actions can include helping the donor unload their car before the sorting can begin. They can include finding boxes to put the donations in temporarily if the donor wants their boxes back, and so on. In the homeware department, which is manned by the same employees that manage the back door, many additional smaller actions are required. In addition to just ensuring the operation runs smoothly, such ad hoc actions are required due to the variety in the types of objects that are donated. This variety is astounding, even though most of the donations contain perfectly ordinary items. The variety makes the sorting exciting, but it is also more demanding than in other departments. Practically every object requires special attention. This also means adapting routinized practices in every valuation; it does not mean that every individual valuation is unique *per se*. Comparison is the main instrument used to determine the value, even with very different objects. In the example below I describe how individual actions are necessary to make some objects available for more formal pricing structures:

> 'One day when I was working with Scott at the back door pricing stuff, I came across some office supplies that were left at the bottom of a box; pins, tape, post its, pens, etc. I asked Scott if he ever priced stuff at less than fifty cents, because I had just priced a number of items slightly bigger and more attractive than these at fifty cents. He told me that they don't and said I should "bundle them together". That means finding a way to ensure the items stay together, either with tape or by using one of the various sized bags they have in the store. I made bundles of ten pens and an eraser for two $ or three Post-it note blocks, or three packets of staples + five pens. I then taped up the bags, priced them and put them in 'office supplies' in the homeware section of the store.'

It is clear that social action is what creates value in this case. The objects have been considered valuable enough by the donor to donate, and potentially valuable enough in bulk for the organization to accept. But in order to capture or create the value of the individual objects, further action is needed. If the employees did not perform the practices required, the value would not be realized and the objects would end up in the trash. The effort that employees put in is crucial. One day I covered for Kaito during his lunch break and priced some of the donations. I collected some coasters, 11 in all, and wrapped them in a plastic cover and priced them as a set because they were not particularly valuable individually. As I continued going through another crate of donations I noticed one more coaster of the same kind. This kind of experience raises questions for the sorter: 'Is it worth finding the package of coasters I made earlier to add this one to the set?' Given that I had already spent some time collecting them, finding the plastic wrapping, taping them up, finding the charity code and deciding on a price, adding to the set seemed excessive since I had only priced them at two dollars. The extra one would not change the price and it would not be valuable enough to price on its own. The time spent redoing all of the wrapping seemed excessive. The value of the 12th coaster was only realizable together with the other 11; otherwise it is just waste because it is not worth pricing on its own.

The examples given describe how individual actions are not equivalent to the monetary value that the object is expected to fetch in sale. A greater number of actions does not necessarily produce a higher price. As Graeber describes, this is one of the problems run into by Marxist value theories when labour is seen as a direct indicator of economic value. There is no direct correspondence between the amount of labour spent on a single object and that object's price. The amount of individual actions required to transform the objects collectively produce value. Rewrapping the package makes sense according to other values. In the CTS, being thrifty is a dominant value. Analytically, this rather abstract point is important, but it is less important in the situation where an employee has to make the decision whether to discard an object or put in the work needed to make the object available for valuation. I did not find that the employees considered these individual actions justifiable, based on an overall assessment of the labour time spent by the organization and the economic outcome. What I did find were expressions of other types of value that come into play, one of which was that of not wasting donations. Making cheap household products available was another. From my own experience, the satisfaction of completely emptying a box or a crate also played into the decision to utilise every object. Exceptions to general rules also demonstrate how informal actions and decisions play a major part in the process—as in the following example:

> ‘Karen is sorting the linen that comes in. The CTS doesn’t really accept linen, but once in a while some will come in as wrapping for other items. Some of it is consciously accepted if the person working the back door can see that it is clean, in good condition and saleable. If it is altogether unused or a cool vintage fabric they will also accept it. When I talked to her she was looking at an old Star Wars bed sheet from the 1980s. Unfortunately somebody had cut out a piece of it, but she tells me it is still something that people like so they will sell it for 1,75$ anyway. “Somebody will probably use the fabric for a craft project”. She was also pricing some blankets because the weather is good at the moment, and people will come in looking for something to sit on in the park.

Utilizing every object is important, and this importance generates ad hoc actions. It is often the last items in the box or the wrapping (as in the example above) that prompts the decision to perform such actions. Put simply, the question ‘What do we do with this?’ is indicative of how and why these actions are performed. This question is an integral part of all sorting and valuation in the CTS, but becomes more expressed in instances where there is something left—something that defies established categories or routines. Sometimes the decision is to throw away the object or left-overs, but this also requires judgement and actions. Valuations are routinized and stability is attempted constantly, but valuations ultimately rest on individual judgements. The performance of these judgements makes use of both formal and tacit knowledge (Polanyi, 1983), which together form the basis of a creative individual decision. As a process of transformation, the trajectory of objects through the CTS is similar to industrial production, in the sense that donations as ‘raw materials’ are made into commodities—only in this case the production is a categorical transformation.

Forms of Knowledge

More expensive items generally require more time for valuation, though not always. Objects of a certain brand, like Pyrex kitchenware, are relatively easy to value, and are still quite valuable compared to similar non-brand-name wares. As Botticello describes, brands function as formal indicators that allow the person sorting to read the product and organize it into a structural system of significance where objects without a brand-name must be considered individually. In that sense, the effort the employee puts in is not greater; in fact it might be less because of the immediate referencing that is available. The codified knowledge that Botticello refers to is explored in Entwistle (2009). Botticello writes:

> ‘The codes in the labels, while useful at times, can be a hindrance to speed and productivity, and therefore it is preferable to know one’s

> materials through non-coded indicators. More often than not, the strategies employed to figure out what the classification of the garments will be is discovered through sensual engagements with the materials.' (173)

While this is also true at the CTS, codes or labels play a much greater role here because the valuation is coupled directly with pricing. There are no formal categories of best or worst or useful (Botticello 2012). The sorting is much more detailed. In individual valuations, codified knowledge has a great impact; however, the material condition of the objects ranks higher in the valuation than brand-names. Unlike textiles, which are the subject of Botticello's research, in the sorting in the other departments of the CTS I did not find the same 'inherent' qualities in the materials, with the exception of precious metals.

Negotiations over Valuations

Although individual judgements are the basis of valuations, inconsistency can create confusion amongst customers who do not understand, for example, why one cup is more expensive than another. As a representative of the organization, the employee operating the register will often have a difficult time explaining this when customers ask. And this is because there is often no 'reason'. The striving for uniformity is a way to prevent these situations; but, as the managers made very clear to me, every valuation is based on individual judgements and the managers respect these judgements. Discrepancies are minimized over time through conferring and cooperating, but they are never entirely eradicated. There are other cases in which customers question the organization's authority by offering their own knowledge of particular objects. I experienced one particular incident which I later asked Cliff to tell me about:

> 'Some days ago a Chinese silver bucket was donated, which one of the managers looked up online. They found a similar one which was antique, and the bucket was put in the shop for 350 $ because it was antique, Chinese and made of silver. Then yesterday a customer who was interested in the bucket told Armun that it was not made out of pure silver. Cliff decided to remove the bucket from the store to look for a new price, but he has not been able to find any so far.'

Normally the employee will not let a customer interfere with the pricing directly because they will only comment on the price in order to get something cheaper and the employer needs to know that they are being sincere. In this case, Cliff knew the customer and believed he was telling the truth. This is another example of how the authority of the organization and its ability to transform objects can be challenged; but because of the trust that the managers have in certain customers and buyers they are able to accommodate for adjustments based on the discussions they have. Donors also regularly question the organization's authority. Some donors are concerned with what percentage of the sales are donated and others question the professionalism of the employees. Armun told me about a few instances in which donors, who also shop in the store, have approached him with questions or complaints. In some cases the complaint has to do with the price of a certain item. He described how a donor found an object in the store that she had donated and was disappointed by the price the organization had put on her donation. In other cases, donors discover that the object has been tagged with a charity code different to the one they named to the employee who received the donation. In all of these cases, Armun or another manager will engage in a conversation with the customer, trying to explain the pricing strategies and how in a large organization some objects will inevitably end up being tagged incorrectly, but that overall they take tagging very seriously.[11] These negotiations between insiders and outsiders make the categorization—the way of making sense of the objects—apparent and make visible the situated nature of the practices that are performed. Categorization is localized through individual performances of routinized practices and these are influenced by external knowledge.

Categorizing Uniqueness

Other studies have also shown how systems and categories help organizations create hierarchies of worth and re-establish discarded objects as valuable (Botticello 2012, Gregson et al. 2010). Systematization is carried out through practices of categorization as an investment of energy and concern that enables employees to make sense of seemingly amorphous piles of discard. In my research I found the same striving for structure to be absolutely central—and the examples I have described above testify to this centrality. No matter how difficult an object is to categorize, employees will attempt to do so by performing ad hoc actions intended to enable the objects to be considered part of a category. In some cases, however, an object may be so difficult to categorize that the employee will give up and throw it away—and this may happen every day due to the sheer number of objects that pass through the CTS. The employee may also invent a new category, or adjust existing categories, to fit the new object.

No matter how well the objects are categorized, some of them challenge the structures that the employees tirelessly seek to enforce. At any given time, a box

[11] As a volunteer, I quickly became aware of the organization's determination and commitment to getting the tagging right. The employees who were instructing me showed me how tagging with charity codes was the first thing to be done. If there are many individual items, they told me, you either put them in a box and tag the box or you tag all of the items individually.

containing cups, paperclips, three pens, a pair of jeans and five books may be donated, activating the process in which the employees begin organizing the different objects. Almost every donation raises new questions and requires slight adaptations to the system. The individuality of the objects means that each category of the systematization needs to be broad. At the same time, knowing exactly where things go and why is important in order to perform a valuation and pricing of the object that balances the different dimensions described above. While the individuality of each object is crucial to their transformation into valuable commodities, at the same time it hinders a seamless flow from discard to commodity. I have described the transformation as a movement from disorder—matter out of place—into commodities through meaningful structures and categories. On one level, therefore, a semiotic, structuralist level, the objects are transformed into valuable commodities; while on another level the individual nature of the objects resists this structure and changes the categories. Don Slater (2014) argues that ambiguity is not a property of objects but of classification and practices, and goes on to outline a number of ways in which ambiguity affects objects in markets and in consumption. Along the lines of Douglas's argument, Slater describes the potentiality of ambiguity as both a risk and an opportunity. Being uncategorizable is a potential taboo, but also a possibility for change. In the sorting of second-hand objects, uncategorizable objects are certainly potent and their position can result in a higher value. It may also mean that the object is discarded or disappears in the store because it does not sit comfortably among other similar objects.

Adjusting categories is one of the clearest expressions of the performative nature of the valuation structure. At any moment in time, the CTS will operate with a specific number of more or less defined categories that appear stable to the employees and the customers. Over time, however, these categories change: new categories are invented and old ones are abandoned to fit the demands of the customers or the objects. Some of them are formal categories that are written down and enforced throughout the sorting process. Karen told me about how children's wear had been a category for period of time, but had later been abandoned, to the point where the CTS no longer accepts children's clothes. This category was removed due to the amount of work it took to keep that section of the store clear. According to Karen, customers shopping for children's clothes would often take all the clothes off the hangers and just leave them on the floor. An executive decision was thus made to stop offering this type of products altogether. Other categories are removed or established more unnoticeably based on the donations that come in. Sometimes there are a lot of similar items, or a lot of things that can be grouped together. During the time I worked in the CTS, crystal glassware was one particular section that appeared and disappeared regularly. At other times there were a lot of ceramic items. So the different sections grow or diminish or even disappear over time to make place for something else. The book department provided another example. In July a large number of auction catalogues were donated, and hundreds more were donated over the next two months. Drew told me that they came from a man who used to own a second-hand book store but had been forced to close the store because of the rising rent. This story was similar to several I heard during the eight months I spent in San Francisco. When the auction catalogues started coming in, we made a clear section in the book department devoted to them so that all the employees and volunteers working in the book department would know where to put them. This also helped the customers interested in buying the catalogues to locate them in the store. Some days after as I was putting out objects in the homeware section, a customer approached me asking about the catalogues, wondering if we would be putting out more of them. I had seen him before and he told me he had been coming several times a day to look for more catalogues and that he had already bought more than a hundred. The temporary categories are an efficient means of creating order even of more specialized objects.

As Botticello (2012) notes, donations produce categories that reclassify objects. Creating categories is a way of creating meaning and becomes a way of establishing relations between employees (who now know where to put things) and customers (who now know where to find them). In the CTS it is clearly visible how the systematisation and categorization of the objects along the trajectory through the process is crucial for the value creation. Each category relates the objects to other similar or comparable objects and to other external contexts. It also became clear to me how categorization is disrupted by the contingency of objects and their materiality. The fact that nobody knows what or how much will be donated also disturbs the categories. And the uncertainty of what the donations will include means that there has to be a certain amount of openness. However, for the individual doing the job of putting things out on the shelves, the sections are very helpful since they help you go through the cases quickly. In the book department, for example, there were many sub-sections, and as I got familiar with the different sections I felt a certain sense of satisfaction every time I was able to find the right spot for a book. After having done this for a while, I was able to find the right place for almost everything. The objects and the contingency in the donations and their material qualities affect the categorization, as do individual performances of practices.

Customers and Disorder

Even though the categories establish relations between the organization and the customers, the customers do not always respect or understand the structure. Every day, things get moved around in the store and left on racks, on furniture or on the floor. Employees are constantly putting clothes back on hangers and moving objects back to the right department. At the end of each day, the primary task before leaving the warehouse is that of clearing up the store. On sale days, the task is almost impossible. One of the first days I was working at the CTS was a sale day, and Zack asked me if I would help keep the floor clean of clothes and hangers. I started at one end of the long rack that covers the entire wall in the clothing department, but soon realised that this was an unachievable task. Customers were constantly pulling things off the hangers, trying some of them on in the aisles and leaving most of them behind. Some of these clothes slipped behind other racks or were left in the wrong department. Judging by the number of empty hangers I removed from the store during those few hours of the sale, many of the items were sold, but many end up in the 'take back' bin behind the counter where all the objects go that customers have brought to the register but have decided against buying. On sale day the bin is emptied quite often.

The fact that customers move things around is an ordinary and necessary part of most retail operations. Customers need to try clothes on, consider if they actually want to buy the object and so on, and since they are not always familiar with the organization of the store, or do not care, things end up in the wrong places. The practice of categorizing and keeping order is crucial as a value project. This was amply described by Drew when he said: 'it's about putting the right things in front of the right people'. However, the examples illustrate that order and categorization is not a constant but an ongoing process that can quickly slip into disorder.

Categories help employees determine value by connecting an object to other similar objects, but categorization is also a time-consuming practice, and the more categories there are the more time it takes. The process can also become time-consuming if categories are unclear or because objects fit into several categories at the same time. As object categories are not a hierarchical ordering, like the ones Botticello describes (2012), this is not just a question of putting an object in the category that will enable the object to fetch highest price; rather it is a decision of where the right people are likely to find the object. The example of the auction catalogues describes this very well.

Problematic Categorizations

The problem with categories is not only a matter of ambiguity in the sorting process. The way the sections of the different departments are organized can also be problematic. One day when I was putting out new books I was approached by a guy who found our 'ethnic studies' section of the book department problematic. He had been hovering for a while and finally came up to me very politely and told me that he objected to the way we grouped all non-white authors into this section. He also found it problematic that George, the guy who usually puts out the new books, was African American, implying that *we* (Drew and I, or the whole organization) forced George to adhere to a racist or western-centric system of categorization. Another similar issue became clear to me when a woman asked for books in Spanish and I had to direct her to the 'foreign language section'. In a neighbourhood where most people speak Spanish, it is hardly a foreign language. Also, books with a gay theme are always put in the gay-interest section and not in fiction. Considering the CTS's strong commitment to racial, gender and sexual diversity and equality, it is hard to imagine that there is a deliberate strategy to supress or misrepresent minorities. The problem is due in part to the fact that few of the donors, especially the donors of books, are Spanish-speakers. For that reason a section of books in Spanish would be very small and that is probably why they end up in the foreign language section. Another, bigger, issue is that it is much easier to assign objects to broad categories when you have to get the stuff out quickly. Finding the right place to put an object creates a sense of satisfaction, and as the person doing the job you become immune to the content of the category. The difference between the categories are what matters in the practice, not the qualitative content. That does not mean that the categories are fixed or are conceived similarly by everyone. When either customers or employees contest the categorization or their implications their situated and sometimes problematic, meaningsare revealed. Categories are performative and rely on the practice of categorization. Establishing problematic categories that act against explicit value in the organization, such as racial and ethnic equality, demonstrates how practices are individual and collective at the same time. The interconnectedness of activities, formal and tacit knowledge in the practices that establish categories can result in contradictory outcomes.

A Longer Trajectory

In this analysis I have selected the backdoor as the beginning of the trajectory for the objects. It serves as the entry point into the organization, but of course the journey does not start there. During the time I spent working at the back door I met many donors and I learned about the routes taken by the objects before they enter the CTS. Most encounters with donors were rather uneventful, but some were more involved. Earlier in this paper I described my first meeting with a donor donating his late wife's clothes, and although few encounters were so emotional, people would often tell the employees a little bit about why they were donating, or where the objects came from. In order to get a fuller picture I also conducted casual interviews with donors after they had donated at the back door.

Most of the donations come from private homes. Some people get rid of stuff because they are moving, others just to clear some space, while quite a few bring in objects from the homes of deceased relatives. Some donations even come directly from other stores or from artists and collectors. While I was working there, for example, the CTS book department received a huge donation of used books from a bookstore that had to close, and the arts department received a large number of pictures—several hundred, in fact—by a local artist who had died. The trajectories followed by objects before they enter can thus be very different. The anthropological literature on commodities and gifts has often focused on the way objects of formal market-based economies become contextualized and take on gift-like qualities. In this study I address the opposite flow: gifts that leave the embeddedness of the home to be discarded and recategorized as commodities. The sorting and valuation process is a commodification process, but one that salvages the leftovers of previous commodity states as well as other social states of which the object has been a part. The amount of value that is transferred from previous states varies significantly from object to object. As I will describe in the coming chapter, the role of the organization is to detach the objects from previous emotional attachments, but some aspects of former use or ownership can be valuable—especially with unique artistic objects. In this sense the objects retain elements of gift exchanges even beyond their detachment.

Categorization is an organizational project in which objects are transformed culturally from discards to commodities through interconnected individual practices. By making sense of the objects this structure stabilizes the organization and its powers of transformation through routinized practices. Arriving in a state of disorder, the objects have the potential to enter categories that create value by their being related to other similar objects and by the establishment of a meaningful relationship between the object, the organization and customers. The structure is constantly challenged by the individuality of the objects and the contingency of the donations, but the disorder that remains also provides opportunities for value. In the next chapter I will describe in more detail what kinds of value are at stake and how these values are measured.

Which values? Valuation Criteria and Types of Values

Through interconnected practices, valuations transform donated objects and realize their potential value. Although these practices quickly become routinized, they rely on a specific set of values which collectively make the object valuable. These values may be compatible, but in some cases they are conflicting. As Moeran describes, values may be in operation at any given time in the same setting, and they may be indicative of different sets of beliefs as well as different valuation criteria (Moeran 2009). Current debates in consumer research and sociology about the limitations of using single orders as analytical tools demonstrate the significance of this multiplicity (Denegri-Knott & Parsons 2014, Slater 2014). As an extension of the relational value concept that embraces both economic and social value, this suggests that although several types of value are involved they do not have to align to create value in an object. Different values, or 'orders of worth' as Stark (2011) calls them, may be at play and they may be mutually exclusive. However, these orders also collectively form the basis of the valuation of an object.

The different orders that are in play in sorting and valuation relate in different ways to valuation criteria. By following the trajectory it is clear that distinct rationalities, or ‘ways of making sense’ of the objects, are at play. These rationalities both compete and collaborate in generating a full set of values. On the face of it, the ambition to use as many of the donations as possible can seem counter-intuitive, since one of the main ways in which low-priced objects can be sold is by investing extra time in them. Economically, this is not the most efficient use of time or resources. However, the CTS also creates social value by offering household goods to low-income families in the neighbourhood. In addition, they create emotional value for customers who experience the joy of ‘the hunt’ as well as for those donors who find solace in donating to a specific charity. The three dominant orders of worth—economic, social and emotional—are all responsible for the qualities of valuations. Some valuations are based solely on one order of worth but rely on several orders—sometimes conflicting but co-existing—to determine the value of an object.

Social value is particularly directed towards the community, ensuring that certain objects, such as the office supplies described earlier, are made available to customers who need them. Social value also means providing a wide selection of costumes for seasonal holidays and festivals (as I have described earlier) and making sure that all donations are handled responsibly. A large part of the social value that the CTS creates comes from its ability to generate money for the charities. Not only do the charities benefit from this, the employees and customers also express their feeling that the charitable element is important to them.

Economic value is at the same time what all valuations amount to and a specific order of worth. As all donations are based on an ambition to generate as much money for the charities as possible, economic value is central to all valuations. Market forces are rarely expressed explicitly in the valuation of second-hand objects. During my fieldwork I was rarely told that that a particular price was competitive. Indirectly, however, competition between different sellers of second-hand objects or between different buyers is addressed all the time. Economic value is also a type of value in a different way: 'economic' as meaning the best use of resources. In that sense, economic calculation is responsible for rejecting objects that take up too much time or too much space. And economic rationalization also ensures the efficient use of human resources. I will return to this point a little later when I define this particular type of economy or value as 'thrift'.

Economic value and social value are the two types of value that I have described in most detail. Emotional values are perhaps a less direct element in donations, though they are nevertheless a significant part of what makes an operation like the CTS valuable to the employees, patrons and the community. In the account of my first day working at the backdoor I described the first encounter I had with a donor and how he donated his late wife's clothes. This event was a quiet but emotional moment for him, as well as for Karen and myself. We could not but feel sympathy for this person who had lost his partner. This experience was not unique: on several occasions I heard that someone had called or come by to ask about donating to a certain charity for which a relative of theirs had worked. Usually they would call and say that their mother had volunteered for this or that charity and they would like to donate some of her objects to the charity in memory of her. In this way the CTS has become a vehicle not only for getting rid of objects but also for remembrance and solace. Working at the backdoor, I often experienced the emotional relationship donors have with the objects they donate. Some felt a need to describe the objects to make sure the employees accepting them understood the value of them, while some, I think, were a little hurt by the unsentimental handling of their donations as the objects were quickly sorted into bags and boxes and thrown onto carts to be taken into different sections. In a number of cases it also took some time to explain why the CTS would not accept certain items.

The role of the CTS is to detach value from the personal/emotional relations and to consider more generalized patterns of value. The process of transformation, as Gregson et al. describe (2000), is also a way of removing any individual relations and making them more generic. Even if it were possible to communicate the strong emotional ties a donor might have to an object, this would not make the objects more valuable to the end customers. For while customers have many different ways of relating to second-hand objects, customers and storeowners alike expressed the view that direct links to previous owners are not particularly attractive to the customers. Emotional ties, it seems, must be personal, generic or imagined: when there is a direct link, such as a family tie or friendship, objects may become valuable as heirlooms. Generic historic knowledge, such as knowledge of the age and heritage of an object, is valuable. Lastly, an imagined emotional relationship can be valuable. I have heard customers express how certain types of wear on objects can become a symbol of the relationship they imagine the previous owner had with this particular object in the past. In terms of selling used objects, therefore, this does not mean there cannot be any personal relationship with the object, but this relationship has to be indirect. The donor's attachment to a certain object does not always end at the backdoor and—as I have described—some donors will come into the store and argue with the employees about the price that has been put on an object they have donated.

Thrift

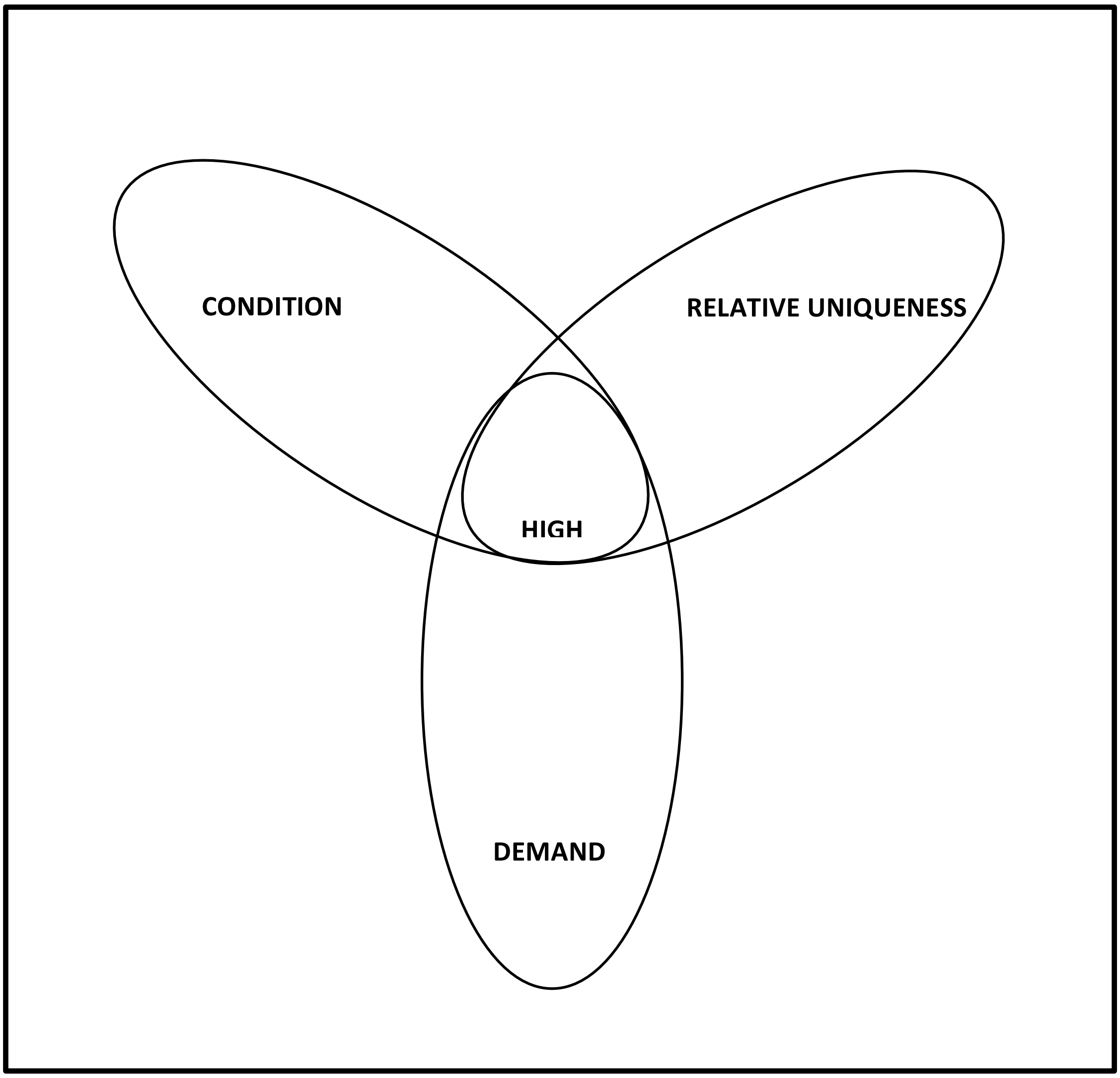
Analysing the practices involved in making second-hand objects valuable in the CTS it becomes clear how the dominant value that guides practices throughout the organization is thrift. At every station along the trajectory, as well as in the larger structures of the organization, being thrifty—i.e., using resources in a considered way and not being wasteful—is expressed through actions and words. From taking responsibility for the donations at the beginning of the trajectory to bundling office supplies or pricing bedding that accidentally enters the flow, the employees make the most of whatever they receive. Thrift is often at odds with pure economic rationality, since the investment of time involved in making objects valuable does not always transform into higher economic output. At the very beginning of this thesis I quoted Cliff saying that there is a purpose to a thrift store and that this purpose is not to exploit the full economic potential of every object. Not necessarily anyway. Being thrifty certainly means making the most of the donations, but not only in terms of economic gain. Making the best use of the donations includes bundling objects, reducing prices, looking things up, testing, cleaning and sorting. Thrift as a value in the organization can perhaps be understood as what Graeber describes as an 'infravalue' (2013: 233). Being thrifty is not an end in itself but a means to obtain other values. By being thrifty, the CTS is able to create economic, social and emotional value. Even so thrift is a powerful feature of the CTS and one, I will argue later, that makes thrift stores unique in secondhand markets.

Valuation criteria: Condition, Demand and Relative Uniqueness

the valuation criteria are the practical measures by which the objects are valued. Most objects will go out on display in the store if they are not broken or flawed, and some objects with minor problems may still be remarketed if they are highly sought-after. Likewise, if there are many objects of the same type then some may be discarded. Different values are responsible for different ways of making sense of the objects. For an object to be considered valuable, a number of specific criteria for assessing their value are set in motion. The three dominant indicators of value as they are expressed through the practices of sorting and valuating are condition, demand and relative uniqueness. These indicators do not represent distinct categories, however, and presenting them as separate glosses over the actual ambiguity and disorder. Nevertheless, as a framework the indicators help visualize the way different values and different criteria interplay.

Comparison is often the easiest way of understanding the valuation criteria of a certain type of object. While I was working in the book department, for example, I looked at what Drew had already priced to decipher the valuation criteria. In cases where I could not find direct comparison, I thought of what he had told me about the different subjects and the condition, availability, size and appeal of different books. Drew told me how he keeps up with bestseller lists to know what something might be worth, and he looks up online for most of the older books. Normally, if a book has some value, he will estimate the value of a particular copy by considering its condition, the number of available copies and whether there are customers for it. If he is able to find a comparable price online he will assign approximately a third of that price to the copy in the store. The rule of thumb in all departments is that if a price can be found then the price the CTS puts on the object is between a third and a quarter of that price. Both Drew and Armun told me about this and described it as providing the incentive for dealers to buy an object and still make a profit.

Even though rare books bring in more money, Drew estimated that it is still the cheap stuff that has the biggest turnover. There may only be a few really valuable books every week, but almost every Monday his stall is full of boxes with new books. Books are not only valuable because of their subjects. Drew told me that a lot of the nice-looking but inexpensive books are bought by people who dress up houses that are for sale—estate agents and interior designers, etc.—to fill up the shelves. The books just have to look good, and Drew tries to keep them cheap so that they are bought by these customers instead of just sitting on the shelves. In these cases, condition and demand are the primary indicators.



The relationship between the three main valuation criteria

Condition

To be displayed in the store, a donated item must be either relatively unique or in perfect condition. Of course, ‘perfect condition’ does not mean the same here as it does in first-hand markets. Some flaws are tolerated, but they should not impede the usability or reduce the attractiveness of the object. When I started this research I assumed that use in itself could be a relevant measure of the value of second-hand objects. I wanted to find out if patina, wear or ‘used-ness’ could be considered value-adding. In the CTS, however, I found that something looking used almost always detracts from its value. Glass and porcelain item are always discarded directly if there is any material damage to them. As Scott described it: ‘we get so much stuff donated and there is not enough room in the store for objects that do not sell’. The section of the homeware department for glass is always full, as are the shelves on which cups and mugs are placed. The only glass objects with minor chips that are sometimes allowed in the store are crystal glass objects.

As in the other CTS departments, the process of sorting and pricing books includes a lot of discarding. When sorting the donations, most books go onto the shelves priced, but some are so poor that they do not even make it out there. The main problem is their condition: a lot of the books are dilapidated, have pages missing, or are stained. In some cases people donate books that are mouldy, probably because they have left them in an estate sale or a storage space, or simply because they have kept the books somewhere damp before they got around to donating them. In some cases you can see that the box has previously been part of a garage sale and has been left out in the rain or some such. All books that are mouldy or water-damaged are discarded. There are simply too many books to keep the ones in poor condition: they take too long to sell and they take up space that could be occupied by other books in better condition.

With regard to condition assessment in the clothing department, smell is also an important aspect of the initial assessment: almost every item of clothing that smells old or worn is discarded. Raneeta told me that it would have been nice to wash some of the clothes instead of discarding them but that unfortunately they neither had the time to do this or the space to dry them. Here the organization’s responsibility towards the donors and the principle of economic efficiency are at odds.

Relative Uniqueness

A lot of paintings are donated to the CTS and Cliff is responsible for valuating all of them. The value of paintings, in Cliff's words, depends on three things: their 'condition, the skills of the painter, and heritage'. He will start by looking for a signature, and if he finds one he looks up the artist online. If there is any information available, he looks for a price example on another work by the artist. Often he finds a price on eBay. This price is used to determine the value, and he normally sets the price that the CTS will charge at 50% or less. Like the personnel in the other departments, Cliff wants the items to sell quickly and so he has to consider what customers in a thrift store will realistically be willing to pay. Sometimes he sets the price too low and the painting is sold immediately; at other times the price is too high. In the latter case he will reduce the price after some time. In cases where he is able to find information about the artist based on the signature and Internet searches, he will print out a sheet of information and put it next to the artwork at the register. Finding a signature and additional information on the artist is a process of individualization of the object. As a scenic view, a painting is difficult to distinguish from other similar scenic views, but with a signature and artist's information it becomes an artwork of a particular painter and its uniqueness is established.

Kopytoff (1986) argues that objects can become valuable due to their level of singularity. I have described how the number of copies of a certain book can make the difference between no value and the standard value of a book, but there are several other instances where uniqueness is the decisive factor of an object's value. Graeber clarifies Kopytoff's argument by adding that in fact what is ranked in terms of uniqueness is an object's ability to accumulate history (2001:34). In the sorting process, an object's ability to accumulate history is challenged by the detachment that happens when the organization assumes responsibility for the object. In fact it is the recording or communication of history that is challenged. In the CTS, communicating the history of an object is reserved for high value items, mainly artworks. The history usually consists of information found online, such as the biography of the artist. The information is thus generally available, or not usually particular to the object but rather to the person who has created the object. It is rare for the specific history of an object to be passed on, and this is perhaps a distinctive feature of an organization like the CTS and the way they create value. Preserving and communicating the history and pedigree of an object is usually reserved for auction houses and antique dealers, which have a very different way of creating value: 'Antiques are things that have passed from rich person to rich person', as Drew put it. In other words, there is a linearity involved, which is impossible in the CTS due to the way objects are jumbled together at the beginning of the trajectory only to gain or regain individuality along the way. Ironically, as I have described, in the time I was working in the CTS we accepted and sold hundreds of catalogues of antiques. In that way the organization is involved in passing on the history of other objects even if they are not involved in selling the objects themselves.

Uniqueness in objects for the CTS is something besides the objects' distinct biographies, and can better be described as relative uniqueness. Most of the objects that pass through are relatively common: pots and pans from supermarket chains, clothing from high street stores and books published in the last century. The relatively unique objects are those that are either older or bigger than other similar objects, or ones that have distinctive design features. Relative uniqueness is a decisive factor at the other end of the spectrum as well. In the time I worked at the CTS we received several copies a week of the book *Under the Tuscan Sun*. Many copies were sold again, but not always as quickly as they came in. Drew was keen to supply buyers and customers with books they were likely to buy, but also to minimize the number of perfectly good books that were discarded without ever getting on to the shelf. This dilemma did not affect the price as much as the value. The price was the same regardless of the number of copies, but the value could change significantly in the sense that a book might be discarded altogether if too many copies were already filling up the shelves. The speed with which objects are donated and the capacity for storage simply does not allow for keeping books in storage until there might be room for them. Just like in the other departments, books are priced low to make them sell quickly. Even the more expensive books, as Drew said, 'are cheap compared to other dealers. So if people want it they will buy it'.

Demand

Demand as a valuation criterion is expressed in a number of ways. On the one hand, demand refers to how many customers are interested in a certain object, which in some cases leads to an increase in price. This is noticeable specifically in collectible items or objects with specific brand names. Formalized knowledge of this demand helps employees sort the objects faster, but it also affects the price positively. Demand, however, also affects prices negatively when employees consider the economic position of the patrons. This is shown, for example, in the way they collect office supplies together for school children or price objects according to the customer group's ability to pay a certain amount. Demand in this case means that the economic value decreases as social value increases.

Supply and Demand

Demand, as I have described it in this section, refers not only to high demand that results in high prices; it can also be expressed as a need on the part of certain customers for inexpensive items. There are certain objects, however, that do not meet any demand. Many times during my fieldwork I heard about the differences in the social and economic backgrounds of the people who donate and the people who shop in the store. It was difficult for me to detect any overall difference because I experienced the customer base to comprised a wide variety of social, economic and cultural groupings, including local homeless people, low income Latin American families, tourists and professional buyers. Drew referred to this discrepancy several times, and perhaps the tendency was most detectable in the book section. On one of the first days I worked there, as we were inspecting the aisles in the book department, he said: 'Everyone in San Francisco wants to be a writer. That's why we have so many books on writing and editing.' But the customers were not the same people who come to San Francisco to be writers. The same was the case with other types of books that were donated, especially opera magazines. Drew kept a small shelf for these magazines, since quite a lot of them were donated. The problem was that they never sold.

> 'You have to consider the subject of the book, and whether people can find the information online. But ultimately condition trumps over everything. If the book isn't in good condition it is not worth anything. Also you have to consider the clientele. Our donors aren't necessarily the same as our customers. The donors are affluent and well-educated residents of the area. The clientele are tourist and Latina housewives. They are not interested in opera magazines.'

What characterizes all these criteria and the valuations as a whole is that they represent expectations or perceptions of value. The CTS accepts, sorts and prices objects based on a qualified assumption about what the objects are worth. In that sense the price that an object is given expresses potential value but does not indicate any 'real' sense of value. It can only ever indicate that a price was either low enough for someone to buy the object or too high for anyone who happened to be in the store during the time the object was on display to buy. The price is therefore the most difficult aspect of the valuation about which to formulate specific conclusions. As I have described, the valuations are always individual and they are always situated in a specific context and dependent upon the individual who performs them. As the objects enter the market, that is the store, they enter another context in which the assumptions and knowledge of the employee are challenged and tested. Whether or not an object is sold, it feeds into the accumulated knowledge within the organization to produce more precise valuations of other objects.

Although social relations create value, from the analysis it is clear that somehow this value is attached to the materiality of the object. This materiality, or the sorters' perception of it, is of course related to socially constructed understandings of what condition means in different contexts; but these relations are constantly mediated or communicated through material objects. Two of the valuation criteria I found to be dominant have to do with materiality, i.e. condition and relative uniqueness. Condition is a sliding scale from 'perfect' to 'unacceptable' by which the objects' individual materiality is considered. Relative uniqueness, on the other hand, is a matter of collective material presence: either there are many copies of the same objects or there are few. First when it is established whether an object is relative uniqueness is the object assessed individually. In the following chapter I will address the role of materiality and objecthood in valuations, but before that I will address some of the additional less prominent values that affect the valuation practices.

Personal Values

In the time I worked for the CTS, I noticed the way that the employees and the managers all share an interest in old or used things. This interest is sometimes expressed explicitly by some of the employees, but it is also noticeable in practices. I became aware that there is a quiet agreement between colleagues to put certain objects aside for others. To avoid favouritism, there is a policy that only mangers price stuff intended for the employees, so the main advantage the employees get is the chance to see the objects before the customers. When I asked around about whether they all find things, I got a variety of answers: from Ned exclaiming 'I've worked here for four years—I am through with stuff!' to Cliff's more low-key response that 'yeah, I find stuff now and then'. When he said this, Karen interrupted him by saying 'Oh, you should see Cliffs house—it's amazing!', referring to the collection of things, artworks and furniture he has accumulated over the years. 'I'm not a hoarder,' Cliff explained, 'but I have a huge collection in my house.' Others are like Liz who makes her rounds of the store on the days she's working looking for stuff she can use, while Karen collects vintage Pyrex kitchenware that the others put aside for her if she does not find it herself.

It seems that people connect with used objects and the context of thrift stores in different ways, and a lot of the buying and selling, handling and sorting of used objects is driven by personal interest. When I have presented my research at conferences or meetings, I often end up getting a lot of interesting stories and observations from the people listening. Used things have a way of making people remember and reflect, and this is a quality that is difficult to pin down. It is a quality that adds to the value of second-hand markets, however, and it is expressed in other studies as well as in my fieldwork. ‘Experiential value’ could be one way of describing it—reflecting the fact that shopping is as much a leisure activity as it is a means to an end.

Community Spirit

In the CTS it is not only the shopping experience that adds a social element to the function of the sales floor. Some of the patrons of the store—some customers, others not—regularly use the sales floor for other purposes than shopping, especially for recreational purposes, including sleeping. The large furniture department always features several large sofas and lounge chairs. Often, if not daily, patrons would be hanging out in the sofas, speaking on the phone or talking to each other and sometimes even taking a nap. Although this was sometimes discussed or verbalized amongst the staff and management, it seemed that the employees and the managers quietly accepted such behaviour. There were a few times where employees or managers would ask patrons to leave the furniture, but hanging out was mostly considered a part of the CTS. This sense of community ranked high on the agenda of the organization, although the explicit purpose was to raise money for charity. The employees and volunteers also form relationships with customers. Almost every day when I worked in the book department someone would ask me about the other volunteer, Adam. They seemed concerned that Adam might have quit or been replaced by me. Adam has been a fixture of the book department for a long time and it did not seem that the people asking were in fact looking for assistance. Mostly they were just enquiring about him. Generally there is an atmosphere of socializing as much as buying. Customers often ask about the books and it seems that whenever I spend enough time in the store people will start asking questions. Some are actually interested in hearing something about a book or whether the store has this or that, but others just wanted to talk. Ursula, for example, comes in almost every day to look for merry-go-rounds, or anything else that rotates it seems—sometimes just round things. She often asks employees for help finding them, and they patiently answer her that 'today there aren't any merry-go-rounds'. One day when I was working at the back door, Ursula came round to donate a cup. I could see she had something in mind, and she took the opportunity to ask: 'Now that I'm back here donating, could I just go through the donations to see if you have any merry-go-rounds?' Ralph answered her politely that they do not allow customers back here and that he had not found any merry-go-rounds.

In the thrift store, the value of used things, as well as the practices around them, are embedded in a variety of cultural, social and economic contexts—from a growing interest in second-hand objects as cultural commodities imbued with experiences and nostalgia to the economic reality of gentrification. Serving the community is a high priority for donors and the organization itself. As new customers begin to visit the store other customers disappear. On my last visit to the CTS a year after I had done my fieldwork, Armun told me that they had started participating in a Sunday event on Valencia Street to be more visible in the community. 'As the rent rises in the Mission our customers are forced out of the area. Many now travel to come to the store. We need to do something to reconnect with the community.'

Return to Rubbish Theory, Gifts and Commodities

Thompson's rubbish theory highlights the presence of objects that are no longer wanted or valued by their current owner and how value decay and material decay do not go hand in hand. (1979: 8–9). Objects linger long after they are no longer valuable to anyone. Second-hand markets exist because of this fact; but as my study shows, rubbish is in the eye of the beholder. Parsons introduces Thompson's theory into the study of consumption and presents examples of how practices of value creation might look. The specificity of these practices makes it clear that what Thompson's theory is about is one person's experience of the value of a particular object. As soon as the object enters a larger social relation, the possible value of the object become a subject of negotiation. It is clear that one of the purposes of the CTS is to determine whether an object is in one of the three states along the trajectory from discard to commodity; but contrary to Thompson's arguement, the study shows that objects can pass from rubbish to transient again—at least if discards are the same as rubbish. If ridding oneself of unwanted objects is to consider them rubbish then the donations that the CTS accepts are, for the most part, rubbish. But only a fraction of these enter a durable state after they have been discarded. Most of the objects re-enter the precarious position of transient, where their value is diminished over time due to wear and desirability. Many objects gain value from this process even if they do not become durable, but the value they gain is not constant. A Pyrex bowl in a thrift store is in most cases more valuable than it was to the person who discarded it. But it will only retain that value as long as demand is high. Fluctuations in prices in second-hand markets are very common. Many traders I have talked to attest to this. Objects that seemed to be a solid investment ten years ago can suddenly fall out of favour with customers and their prices drop radically. As Parsons argues, Thompson's theory can help studies of consumption to focus on value movements and the instability of object value; but as my study shows, the theory is more difficult to apply in specific cases, as they either challenge the categories and trajectories or blur the boundaries.

Writing biographies of things, as Kopytoff suggests, offers a temporal understanding of the changing nature of objects in a social sphere. He describes how objects change category over time as a result of biographical events such as buying, giving, selling, etc. It is one of these events, or sets of events, that is the focus of this thesis: the remarketing of used objects. These events, the result of a number of practices that include donating, sorting and valuation, transform objects from a relatively invaluable bulk of discards into singularized commodities. Gifting and commoditization are equally important, and as such the value of these objects is affected by both. Kopytoff suggests that an object can be an heirloom and a commodity simultaneously to different people in accordance with different value systems (1986: 80). In the process of remarketing used objects the objects have to potentially be both to the same person, i.e., the person sorting them. If the objects were treated only as potential commodities, more things would be looked up and sold online, the prices would be higher, and many of the cheaper objects would be discarded. In fact, as Armun described to me, the CTS would most likely cease to exist in this case, since they would generate more money from the sale of the warehouse than they would from many years of operating. A completely economic analysis would likely find several instances of inefficiency in the operation, but analysed as elements of a gift exchange these practices make sense as part of the aim of the CTS. As Cliff expressed it: 'we could do the eBay thing to make more money, but that kinda defies the purpose of a thrift store'. At the same time, it is abundantly clear that without commoditization the organization would not exist either. Gift exchange is not only carried out by donors, it pervades the whole organization: from sorters 'giving' their time to bundle non-valuable objects to pricing structures that are sensitive to the economic circumstances of some of their customers, to the employees allowing patrons to nap or hang out in the furniture department, and to the overall aim of the organization to generate money to the various charities they partner with. The gift givers, that is the donors, are also caught up in this duality: they are not necessarily driven by altruism alone, since, for example, they can get a tax refund from making the donation. In some cases, donating unwanted items even provides absolution from indulging in overconsumption. But focusing on the practices involved and how employees and donors invest actions and concern in them makes it possible to consider both economic market-driven structures and social and emotional influences as well. Considering only the social aspects of the exchange of donations also creates a simplified image of the reality of second-hand markets. The human actions invested in something, be it in the value of an object or an organization, is a potentiality in that relation until it is capitalised. Capitalizing or making something exchangeable in the form of an abstracted medium of equivalence releases that potential and renders the relation stale. But in the CTS the capitalization of (some of the) value generates social value in other areas. It is clear that thrift is the dominant value in the CTS and making the most of the donations transcends all aspects of valuation practices. Analysed as an expression of thrift, the negotiations between economic and social and emotional values create coherent patterns of value.

Abjection, the Remainders and Dirt

Throughout the process from donation and sorting through pricing and selling, waste is constantly being generated. Although the whole process is one of re-establishing discards as valuable commodities, something is always left behind, things are broken or get dirty or are just not saleable. Looking at the ‘uneven remainders’, as discard studies urge researchers to do, illustrates how valuations in the second-hand trade create a system that orders (read: dominates) objects into systems of meaning. However, it is also a system that relies on these remainders and on the individual employees' ability to creatively recontextualize them. Although some of the discard literature has a tendency to romanticise waste, the attention structures and organizing as a form of domination is important to keep in mind. The spectre of the cultural taboo of impurity that Douglas describes still lingers. Analytically it is important to retain a sensibility to the disorder, ambiguity and dirt that is part of this process. Discarded objects form a potent commentary on organizational attempts to marginalize waste both materially and symbolically. The analysis of the practices of valuation that I have presented above testifies to the adaptability and creativity of the employees in making the most of the donations, no matter how small or unmanageable they are. Disorder is an important element of valuations that also provides the opportunity for value. It is also an illustration of an adaptable organizational system that, no matter how well it categorizes, creates remainders. Thrift as an infravalue, even a form of tactic in Certeau's terminology (1984) is a situated response to reality of the flow of objects that allows the organization and especially the individual employees to navigate the larger structure and balance different kinds of value. In chapter five I will discuss how thrift defines the thrift store as an actor in the larger context of secondhand markets.

From Structure to Interaction – Descending into the Material

In this chapter I have described in detail the process of transforming objects from discards to cultural commodities and how value is created and captured through a series of practices that identify and suggest the usefulness and potential value of an object by placing them in the context of a charity store that has established authority in and through these sets of practices. The transformation is based on identifying to whom the objects may be valuable and to how many. This I have described as demand. Secondly, estimating whether an object is of singular value forms the next part of the valuation. Based on experience and formal knowledge, the object's relative uniqueness is estimated and reflected in the price that is put on it. While these two criteria are significant, the first and foremost is an assessment of the object's condition. Potential flaws, cracks, stains or, alternatively, completeness, are the primary indicator that trumps the others in most cases. I have described how different types of values influence the valuations and that these are both complementary and conflicting. The state of disorder in which the objects arrive in is battled through systems of categorization, but a certain level of disorder and ambiguity remains throughout the process.

Practices as a locus for social research highlights the human aspect of the social. When practices are seen as the dominant form of sense-making and a way for researchers to access cultural and social phenomena, one has to consider what this perspective leaves out. The definitions offered by prominent practice scholars usually consider the entanglement of knowledge actions and the objects that are part of the practices (Gregson 2007). The embodied nature of practices also takes the materiality of actors into account, but objects and their material presence are less prominent in some of these perspectives. Valuation practices involve bodily activities, forms of knowledge, as well as objects and their uses, and a particular interest of this study is the object the next chapter looks closely at this aspect of practices.

I have framed the analysis with a social concept of value that embraces both economic and relational aspects. This approach has highlighted the contextual nature of values, and in the next section I will look deeper into the role of objects in the practices of valuation. Although the value of the object is established through actions, it seems that the materiality of objects plays a huge part in the valuation, particularly in the assessment of an object's condition. At the heart of

Graeber's value concept and the Maussian tradition he builds on is the matter of objectification. The division between gift economies and commodity economies is centred around the extent to which the two personify objects or objectify persons (Graeber 2001: 36). As objectification in Graeber's views is a reductionist action, he is keen to establish value away from the object. While I have followed this perspective and found that what is considered valuable in the CTS is established through practices and relations, addressing what objects do seems imperative considering the amount of stuff the organization handles. In the Maussian tradition, people involved in gift economies treat objects as though they had person-like qualities (Mauss (1990 [1950]), Gregory 1982). That would be one way of accounting for the way objects seem to present themselves to the employees sorting them as individual objects that provoke certain actions. In the next chapter I explore approaches to the role of objects that establish symmetry between human and non-human actors. I will look closer at how objects have been approached in social science and define a perspective that considers the integrity of the object as part of a relational value theory.

The question I will address in the following section is that of what role objects play in the practices of valuation. How does action come to centre around material objects if all that is meaningful in these practices is human action and concern? And if objects do impact on how and why valuations are carried out and ultimately what value is created, how do we conceptualize this role without fetishizing the object? On the face of it, Graeber's understanding of value marginalizes the object and its materiality in favour of human agency. If what makes an object valuable are actions and social relations, the object becomes rather dispensable. However, by proposing this concept, Graeber is not disregarding the physical presence of objects. He wants to stress the importance of human interaction, but in fact he notes, following Turner, that one must not forget that the human actions determining value can only be expressed through some sort of material medium (Graeber 2001: 83). He is here referring to mediums of circulation. I will describe the role of objects as a medium for value and analyse the impact or agency that objects have on the process of transformation. Following from the structural approach outlined in this section, I will take the analysis to a micro level and look at the instances where objects seem to be at odds with the structures that categorize them. Based on the analysis I examine whether the materiality of objects or their object*hood* appears differently at the level of social organization and the level of individual people-object interactions.

Chapter 4: Materiality and Objecthood

Valuating Second-hand Objects -an Object-Oriented View

In this chapter I zoom in on the interaction between people and objects at a micro level. In the last chapter I pursued a relational understanding of value and highlighted the social, human aspects. Throughout the analysis I demonstrated how actions and practices create and capture value through categorization as a social project. At an organizational level, unintelligible heaps of discards become meaningful as commodities through thorough inspection, sorting and categorizing. As I also showed, disorder and ambiguity is battled constantly but continues to persist in the process, whether as differences in valuation, uncertainty about categorization, or as a result of customer interactions. As part of a valuation practice, disorder not only presents challenges to the organization but also creates opportunities. Conflicting values, for example, is a form of disorder, but such conflict creates value in different ways to the organization. Disorder also provides excitement for customers as they go on a 'hunt' in the store. Disorder is a social categorical issue, but in most cases the disorder is bound to the objects and their materiality. There is no disorder in the systems in their purest form, but only when the systems 'meet' the objects. And at the same time the systems only exist to handle the objects. In this section, therefore, I bring the analysis down to the level of individual interactions between objects and people. In order to do so I supplement the theoretical framework from the first part with additional theory on materiality and objects. By dividing the analysis into two parts I will demonstrate in greater detail how objects as part of valuations are given agency through social entanglements, but also how objects, by their mere existence, influence valuations beyond this entanglement. Their presence as more than the sum of their social relations has a profound impact on valuations.

This section makes use of a body of literature that has its foundations in a European philosophical tradition, while the previous section primarily addressed Anglo-American anthropological theory. Some of the work I use in this section has been introduced into material culture studies, but some, such as object-oriented ontology (hereinafter: 'OOO'), for example, remains at the margins of the field. The OOO perspective represents a new development, which accounts for some of its relative obscurity, but its explanatory power has also been viewed with suspicion because of its ontological realist claims. By applying a central claim of OOO as an analytical tool, without adopting the position wholesale, I aim to elucidate an aspect of object-human interaction that is otherwise difficult to access and approach objects r only as social agents, but as.

Matters of Materiality

In material culture studies, the role of objects both as material entities and as cultural categories is a subject of constant debate. The stability of objects, their finitude or their fluidity, both as categories and as materiality, has been defined in a number of ways. In the literature produced over the last decade on material culture and commodities there seems to be a tendency in favour of a processual approach to objects, following both empirical and philosophical starting points. As Crang et al. (2012) argue, based on empirical work on the disassembling of tanker ships, objects eventually come apart regardless of how much they are subject to repair. Graeber takes a philosophical trail from Heraclitus to describe the instability of objects as a state of decay (2001), and Miller (2005) has written extensively on material objects with a special focus on consumption and consumer products, describing the relationship between subject and object as a dialectic between materiality and immateriality. Drawing on the Hegelian tradition, Miller argues that subjects make objects that make subjects: 'proper materialism is one that recognizes the irreducible relation of culture, which through production (I would add consumption) creates persons in and through their materiality' (Miller 2005: 17). One of his discussions centres around the process of objectification, and he points out that even what people consider to be most immaterial, such as religion and the transcendental, is made material through objectification in order to make it legible to us (Miller 2005: 21).

In a later chapter in the same volume, anthropologist Christopher Pinney reacts to Miller's definition and expands on the object-subject divide in sociological thought. He traces the division back to Durkheim and describes it as a process of purification that seeks to separate objecthood from subjecthood (Pinney 2005: 257). This division has marked European thought enormously, to the point where the more objective we (human beings) make objects, the more human we imagine we become. Pinney quotes Heidegger saying: '… and all the more impetuously, too, do observations of and teaching about the world change into a doctrine of man, into anthropology' (Heidegger, in Pinney: 258). Miller and Pinney criticize this anthropocentrism in favour of a processual concept of materiality not unlike Graeber's. Miller and Pinney advocate a perspective that promotes equality and, to some extent, a blurring of the lines between subjects and objects. As Pinney argues, it seems that in western thought the more object-like we make objects the more subject-like we feel. Analytically, the qualitative aspects of this divide, simply that subjects are more worthy than objects, produces false assumptions about the social. What Pinney argues is that we need to consider human and non-human objects equally even if they are distinctly different.

Adopting a view of objects as unstable and only temporarily fixed, instead of universal and timeless, opens up objects to enquiry in new ways and allows social researchers to question objects and to access their social relations. Several publications on second-hand industries and practices highlight the instability of objects as part of cosmologies and practices. Besides Crang et al., Norris describes ‘the fragility, impermanence and susceptibility to decay’ (Norris 2010: 178) inherent in fibres, and Gregson emphasizes that objects ‘age, decay and deteriorate…’ (2007: 188). These accounts accentuate instability to accentuate an analytical bias in studies of objects and practices around consumption that focuses on appropriation. Discarding and wearing out objects are important practices and events in people’s lives with objects. On the other hand, as these and other studies also show, second-hand markets are overflowing with objects that are not worn out. To their initial owner they no longer serve the purpose they were acquired for, but materially they are in perfect working order. This suggests, as Gregson et al also point out, that practices and objects are not synchronized. The value and the material condition of an object may decay at different times. Perhaps it is this condition that makes the materiality of objects so exposed in second-hand markets: they are no longer *in sync* with their social value, so the fact that they are there, initially as donations that accumulate on an ongoing basis and need to be managed in order not to take over, makes their material qualities more dominant than their social. Through the process of transforming them, the employees identify potential use and value in the objects and they can be reinstated as commodities. This diachronicity creates instability between the object and its social value.

Objects as Part of the Social

A dominant approach in the study of the roles of objects in social organization is that of Actor Network Theory (ANT). Although there are differences in the perspectives taken within ANT, they share an interest in the generalized symmetry between human and non-human actors (Callon 1986). Attempting to open up black boxes, ANT approaches social phenomena through practices and networks. In her account of the practices of diagnosing atherosclerosis in Dutch hospitals, Mol (2002) describes how objects are being crafted in the process. As an assemblage of methods, practices and objects are used to bring other objects into existence through enactment:

> 'like (humans) subjects, (natural) objects are framed as parts of events that occur and plays that are staged. If an object is real this is because it is part of a practice. It is a reality enacted.' (Mol 2002: 44)

John Law describes Mol's performative stance and makes the reader aware that: 'If we attend to practice and to objects we may find that no objects are ever routinized into a reified solidity. We may find that there are no irrevocable objects bedded down in sedimented practices' (2004: 56). He goes on to say:

> 'And if things seem solid, prior, independent, definite and single then perhaps this is because they are being enacted, and re-enacted, and re-enacted, in practice.' (2004: 56)

As Law would say, drawing on Latour and Mol, scientific reality has been constructed or enacted to produce the appearance of solidity and fixity. Graeber, Law, Mol and Latour argue along the same line that, the apparent stability of objects only stem from their constant re-enactment as part of social performances of practice. They also agree, with variations, that materiality and objects are somehow involved in creating this reality. Together these perspectives produce a rather cohesive account of how reality is enacted and appears stable. Challenging the prevailing view of things as solid definite objects, however, can result in an analytical blindness towards matter, i.e., the physical being of things that are no longer enacted.

Agency and Objects

It is important to stress that Graeber does not follow an ANT approach. The reason I include him here is that ontologically his concept of materiality bears similarities with ANT perspectives, although one is concerned with materiality and the other with objects. Law, Mol and Latour are all interested in exposing how objects only come to appear stable but are in fact enacted. Graeber also subscribes to a fluid concept of materiality, but admits that objects may give the *illusion* of power:

> 'If nothing else, commodities certainly exert a power over anyone who desires them. Marx's commodities differ from heirlooms largely because in their case, the illusion of agency emerges from the fact that their true history has been forgotten; in the case of heirlooms, the value that makes the illusion of agency possible derives from that very history, real or imagined. In any case, energies that went into creating the particular form of the object

and made it desirable are displaced; they come to seem a ghostly agency that guides its present movements. The object of desire becomes an illusory mirror of the desirer's own manipulated intentions.'(Graeber 2001:105)

Where Graeber's value theory is distinctly non-objectifying, ANT is deeply concerned with the role of objects. But as meaning in both perspectives is created in social relations, ANT bridges the levels of social value and objects. The interest in objects in ANT stems from insisting on analytical symmetry between actors in a network. Although there are differences between 'conversations, texts and bodies', there is no reason to assume they have no role in social dynamics (Callon & Law 1997: 168). In *Reassembling the Social* (2005), Latour goes even further in his description of objects and their relation to other actors, and he equips them with agency:

'This is why specific tricks have to be invented to make them talk, that is, to offer descriptions of themselves, to produce scripts of what they are making other –humans or non-humans –do' (Latour, 2005: 79)

The relationship is relational, but he insists that objects are making others do something, that they participate actively in constructing reality. What Latour and Mol especially argue is that practices produce or enact multiple realities that may or may not correspond. Like the laboratories where Latour and Mol conducted their research, the sorting stations I describe can be seen as different realities with different objects. The laboratory is one where objects are constantly produced and stabilized through different media, while the sorting station is where a lot of objects end up after they have been produced and have existed in relative stability for a period of time. The materiality of the objects, however, seems particularly different.

Materiality and Object-Oriented Ontology

A processual view of materiality as always 'becoming' or in decay is useful when we are dealing with objects that only appear through a number of laboratory practices, addressing human objects or objects like an organization. When it comes to very physical objects like old cups or a pair of jeans, it is clear that these objects are not only in the making or in decay: in individual valuations they are also simply 'there'. Claiming this, however, requires specificity. As Graeber points out, considering objects as fixed creates a fictitious stable space where objects are somehow outside of time and space. Arguing for a view of objects as something stable in the world comes dangerously close to a positivist stance so in order to avoid that, I progress from social theory into a philosophical, ontological domain.

When valuating second-hand objects the physical aspects are essential, not only as part of a sociomaterial entanglement but as something that resists social interaction. In the final chapter of an anthology on materiality in studies of organizations, Lucas Introna voices this exact concern in light of a recent upsurge of processual approaches (2013). Following the critique of the subject-object divide and the anthropocentrism that has marked social studies, Introna introduces a philosophical discussion concerning the ontological condition of objects and how human beings relate to them. Introna presents a Heideggerian understanding of 'the radical otherness of things' and argues that objects cannot be reduced to their relationship with humans. Objects are more than just the sum of their social relationships with humans or other objects. To express what this otherness is he draws on Harman's reading of Heidegger. Harman, a proponent of the philosophical perspective known as object-oriented-ontology (OOO), has developed a radical perspective on materiality and the role of objects in the world (e.g. Harman 2002). Together with fellow scholars Timothy Morton and Levi Bryant, Harman presents a view of objects that insists on their irreducibility. As Morton explains:

> '[Irreducibility] doesn't simply mean that there is more to a glass of water than my drinking it. It means that even if I could exhaust every single aspect of the glass of water (melting it, smashing it, evaporating it, shooting its silicon atoms around a particle accelerator, writing a story about it, pretending it's a glass of liquid gold, ignoring it), it would still withdraw.' (Morton 2011: 166)

The otherness, the withdrawal, which is an irreducible property of all objects, leaves human relationships with other objects broken (Harman 2011). Introna uses Heidegger's 'being as becoming' as a way of understanding human and non-human entanglement. The relationship is a process that does not dehumanize either humans or objects. Although other discussions in OOO go against the processual understanding of materiality and objects,[12] Introna's discussion highlights the relevance of this otherwise rather abstract perspective in social studies. While the agency of objects has become a central theme in social research, especially in science and technology studies and ANT approaches, OOO argues that this agency is less about active participation than about withdrawal. The fact that objects are never fully accessible to others is not a pragmatic compromise that leaves room for essentialist normativity but a condition that is

[12] See, for example, Harman (2011) for a discussion of the undermining of objects.

value-free in itself. What withdrawal effectuates become accessible to research and to judgement, but the integrity of objects resists full domination and organization. In the study of the value of objects this is an important point.

Materiality and Objecthood

Many philosophers and theorists who have shaped the study of material culture have been considered as being to some extent philosophical materialists. In short, they subscribe in some form to the conviction that all things derive in some way or other from the material. In Marx's case, the materialist view posits production as the material condition that shapes human life. Although Harman deals specifically with the material, he is clear in his denouncement of materialism, arguing that it either undermines objects or 'overmines' them (Harman 2011). What he means is that materialist philosophy has a tendency to view objects an expression of an underlying substance, matter, which undermines the singularity of the individual object. Alternatively, social theory 'overmines' objects by defining them as merely the sum of their social relations with human beings. Objects, Harman argues, are not in fact reducible to either. As a philosophical point this distinction is clear, but for social science research, with its commitment to empirical studies, the implications are less transparent. I have approached this problem by focusing on one aspect of object-oriented philosophy, namely the irreducibility of objects and the argument that they withdraw from relations. They produce practices and cause effects. They add to representations, become entangled in human practices, obstruct or facilitate, and become partners in social performances. They are extensions of the self and they become so ingrained in human bodies that there is no longer any clear distinction between bodies and objects. But they still withdraw. If objects are equipped with agency, or even vibrancy (Bennett 2010) as objects of social research, we risk overestimating their powers and ascribe actions to objects where they in fact remain inanimate. As OOO scholars would passionately insist, marginalizing objects in a hyper-constructivist ontology only leads to environmental calamity (Morton 2011).[13] Seeing objects as they are, but without thinking that we can know them fully, establishes a medium plane where the significance of objects is considered without overstating their active participation. In valuation practices this perspective helps describe how actions create and produce value in a constant negation with market forces, personal inclinations and the irreducible presence of objects. Analytically this point helps make sense of how human-object entanglements exist and how practices are carried out. If objects are neglected in the analysis of valuation, the risk arises of overlooking the impact they have—not only as the matter with which social practices of organization have to deal but also as the source of the residue, the 'dirt', that is out of place and is left at the bottom of crates and on the floor at the end of a working day.

A Matter of Distance

The withdrawal of objects does not necessarily imply stability, however. If we consider temporality in relation to objects and their presence, it is obvious that some objects appear and disappear quickly while other appear stable over millions of years. In the situated view presented here of objects as part of valuation practices in a thrift store, objects appear very object-like. Therefore I treat them as such at this level of the analysis. While OOO contributes a concept of the presence of objects in a specific context, the question remains as to whether it resolves the problem it proposes to address. My aim here is not to resolve that problem, though

[13] It is almost impossible to overestimate the importance of the influence of post-structuralism and social constructivist philosophy on OOO. OOO has moved through critical theory and philosophy, led by the linguistic turn in cultural theory, to a form of critical realism.

the tension certainly requires some attention. By describing the ontology of objects through human thought, OOO defines the object through correlation between thinking and being, the very condition they reject (Morton 2011:164). By describing objects as irreducible, OOO assigns an intrinsic value to objects that exists outside relations by relating to them linguistically in describing their irreducibility. Despite these unresolved questions, OOO carves a path between essentialist realism and social constructivism by demonstrating that, although nature is a construct, that construct does not correspond with Nature as it is *out there*. Everything that is meaningful about objects is constructed, but the reality it is meant to describe escapes this construction—not as a meaningful out-there but by withdrawing. In an attempt to sidestep this tension, I propose that the description of objects as withdrawn can be useful on its own by pointing to the material presence in itself. Without adopting the ontological claim wholesale, I propose that the concept has analytical power by adding specificity to object agency. While the two concepts address the same subject, the idea that objects have agency equips them with an active power they do not always possess. When agency is described it is often explained as relational. Agency becomes a matter of social relations, and in that way agency does not belong to the objects themselves. Agency can be useful for analysing certain instances in valuation practices, though not others. The way I want to intervene in this formulation is to suggest a use for the concept of withdrawal, not as an ontological condition but as an analytical tool in social research. While processual approaches better describe the reality of materiality in larger social organizational forms and over extended time periods, in the everyday experience of second-hand organizations objects appear as manifest realities—realities that can appear to have agency as solid technologies in practices and realities that withdraw. One way to resolve this tension, is to describe these appearances as a result of the interlocutor's cosmology. In other words that objects are treated as fixed entities because the employees view them as such. It does, however, create a distance from the problem and not a solution. And at the same time, as I was a participant in the social world I describe I found the ontology to be my own as well. The proposition to treat objects as though they are fixed does allow me to carry out the analysis without resolving the ontological question altogether. Instead I propose to wrest withdrawal from the ontology level and place it within the theoretical framework as an analytical element. Following a practice-oriented commitment, withdrawal becomes a feature of the interaction between objects and humans in a situated experience. What appear as processual flows of matter on the level of social organization appear manifest and fixed in individual valuations. In the final chapters I will discuss how to relate the findings from the two levels of analysis.

Building on this discussion I introduce the concept of withdrawal into the practical study of valuation as part of an analytical framework. By combining a non-objectifying value concept with an object-oriented understanding of objecthood, my aim is to create a specific, situated but relational framework that is sensitive to the importance of human action and the presence of objects. Value seen as a sum of human actions invested creates one perspective, and the withdrawal of objects another. The process of valuation consists of organizational practices that create meaning, structure and value, which are constantly challenged by the irreducibility of material objects. The structures aim at creating general systems that order the objects into categories, while the objecthood of the objects insists on their individuality. Using additional examples from my fieldwork I will expand on how these perspectives are expressed in the process of valuation in the CTS.

Analysis of Valuations from an Object-Oriented Perspective

As I mentioned at the beginning of this chapter, objects cannot be separated from the social analysis of valuations. Therefore the presentation of the analysis in the previous chapter describes the instances in which objects and employees enter into practices that transform objects through cultural categories. As such, the ethnographic examples I use in this chapter serve to expand the analysis, not to establish a separate one. In the following I will therefore present additional material adding to the trajectory I have analysed previously. To do so, I return to the schematic representation I developed at the beginning. The figure shows the process from donation to sale and the transformation that happens through valuation practices. Throughout the process, the objects create obstacles and disruptions by resisting and challenging the structure—in some cases by being uncategorizable, by accidentally becoming the responsibility of the organization, or by breaking. Throughout the process, objects fall through the system and create disorder.

Material Aspects of Organising Principles

The structures put in place to secure and maintain the authority that enables the organization to do what it does and to sustain the support from customers, donors and charities are organized around the handling of material objects. The raison d'être of the CTS is to make money from selling donated objects, and they do this through accepting, sorting, valuating and selling them. This means that most of the practices that employees perform take material objects into consideration and accommodate their objecthood. Many practices include tools that help the employees perform the task in a better, quicker or more secure way, and storage space is a huge concern due to the number and volume of the objects. Many practices also include simply moving the object physically from one place to another. This move, or recontextualization, is an integral part of the valuation in that it forms part of a classification that qualifies the objects as something other than discards.

The ongoing process of categorization and ordering is constantly challenged by employees and by customers; but most importantly it is challenged by the objects. Throughout the trajectory, objects resist categories and order. From the time they are donated, objects force the employees to reconsider the structure and the categories by resisting or withdrawing from relations. They sneak in, wrapped around other objects or at the bottom of boxes and bags, and remain there until someone takes action. The objects do not do anything, but they do require attention.

Constraints on the Process

The process the CTS has created for transforming the donations into marketable commodities is not unlike any other industrial process of production: the raw materials enter (here in the form of donations) and are refined through a process which, like a manufacturing process or a production line, qualifies the objects to become consumer products in the end. Just like any industrial process there are events and incidents that obstruct the smoothness of the process and make the production come to a halt. These can include a breakdown of machinery, a lack of supplies, an insufficient workforce or other incidents. These events create obstacles or disruptions in the everyday activities of a production line and are something that is well known in the literature on industrial production and work; so, too, is the adaptability of the actors in the process, both human and non-human. Many examples have been described of how employees tinker with the technology they work with in order to make the process easier or smoother. In that sense the trajectory that objects follow in the CTS is similar to conventional industrial processes, as are the unavoidable disruptions. A feature that separates the process from conventional production, however, is how the objects that are being handled create the disruptions themselves. The diversity of objects, the typological contingency, constantly disrupts the flow. Objects create disorder and prompt new types of behaviour and adaptations. One example is that of the blankets and duvets that sneak into the process despite the fact that there are formal guidelines in place to keep bedding out of the process. The presence of duvets usually prompts one of two responses: either they are discarded immediately or they are stored in an ad hoc category of 'bedding that is valuable enough to keep although the CTS does not accept them as donations'. The Chinese silver bucket which I described earlier is another example of something that requires special attention and which, even after it has received such attention, still resists the structure that is set in place.

'Calling' and the Response of Objects

In order to analyse the process of valuation from different perspectives I have applied a number of concepts or linguistic categories to examine the role and the agency of the objects. In the previous section I described how social actions, practices and relational structures move objects through a process of transformation. In this section I describe the objects' role and their different responses. Latour calls for a conversational engagement with objects; but how do we ask questions of these actors in social research? This can be done in a number of different ways, and in the methodology section I described one such way when I outlined the set-up I conducted involving two employees and the objects they were sorting, which I documented in notes and in photographs. The set-up was an experiment that slightly skewed the naturalistic setting usually favoured in ethnographic research, but it allowed me to ask questions of the objects in a different way. By engaging two employees in conversation about the objects and their potential value, the objects became the centre of a verbalization of assumptions and tacit knowledge that had been difficult for me to access. The experiment foregrounded the objects and made them speak by forcing the employees to express different opinions and evaluations. The responses I got gave me new insights into the individual nature of the valuations and the elasticity of the pricing structure. No decision on price was ever questioned; it was just accepted and then the next object was picked up for sorting. Although the experiment showed that most objects that enter the CTS are relatively ordinary, they still require individual inspection and their physicality (their size, for example, as I described earlier) is considered individually.

Another type of response the objects were able to give when approached with questions about value was through their getting sold. The answer they gave would be ‘yes’ to a question of whether there was a market, a demand, for that particular object, and ‘yes’ to the question of whether someone was willing to pay the price the CTS had put on the object. The valuation was thus correct in assuming there was a demand for the object, but the pricing is another matter. What the objects said was that the price was not too high, but not whether it was too low. Another way of asking the object a question about the price level is through the process of calling. I have described this process before, but here I want to highlight the role of objects:

> ‘Calling old things’: Items that have been for sale in the store for a certain period of time get ‘called’. This means they are taken off the floor or re-priced. In the book department I did a similar calling some time ago, but in the book department the books are rarely re-priced. This is mainly because they are already priced so competitively that the price cannot be the reason they do not sell. Most of the things that have been in the shop for so long are sent for recycling, but some are revalued. In the homeware department the limit is four months, but it varies depending on the quality and price of the item. If the employee doing the ‘calling’ considers the item still of some worth, it is usually priced down (around 50%) and left in the store. I started at one end of the shelves that holds plates and small bowls. Many plates stacked on top of each other, especially on the bottom shelf, and there are two rows of stacks in front of each other. While going through the plates checking the colour of the tags, I moved some of the plates from the back to the front to switch them around. I was slightly surprised that the ones at the back weren’t all old ones that had been sitting there for a long time. The aisles between the shelves are narrow and there is always a lot of traffic in this aisle because it connects the back area to the store. Also, during the time I spent in the homeware department I had not noticed many customers getting down to inspect the plates at the back of the bottom shelf, but someone must have moved them. As I went through the

section I noticed a number of objects that had already been 'called' and were priced significantly lower than the others. These were mostly nicer objects, whether because they had a label underneath, or because they appeared to be older than usual, or because they were handmade.

Making the decision to discard these objects can be difficult in the sense that they are no different from the other objects in the store except for the fact they have spent more time there. In terms of absolute age, they may even be newer than other objects in the store. The decision to 'call' them is therefore only based on the knowledge that there is no demand for them at this time and so they are removed. Unlike the clothes and books, most of the homeware items are not recycled as goods but are ground down for raw materials. The calling is therefore more significant in this department because the objects will be ground down as a result of being called. Although I doubt that all the employees calling objects have this in mind, the sense that it represents a waste is quite dominant. Here 'waste' does not only describe the object but also the investment of time in that object.

The new price the object is given depends on a lot of things, and it is always an individual call. For me it was difficult to call handmade objects, vintage objects or especially unique objects, and much easier to call mass-produced ones. When you do the calling you also have to consider that the reason the CTS calls some objects is to make room for others and to clear out some potential clutter. As new objects are constantly arriving there is a constant

> issue with space. If the item is considered good enough to keep, it gets a new tag with a new price on. All of this requires extra work: from the calling, which is a process of inspecting each item in the department, to the pricing. For each object the pricing gun has to be reset with a new price, the right department code and the charity code. Most of the items I called today were assigned a new price of between 50 c and 2 $.

Calling an object is, in effect, another way of asking questions of the demand and price of the object. Objects speak when you value them, not by requiring verbalised or explicit negotiations, but they 'tell you' what the price should be, as described in the methodology section. As a person sorting you get the sense that the object is letting you know what the right price is, although this sense is supported by the other aspects of the practice. All of these questions, however, have a tendency to suppose that if they are given the right valuation and the right price then the objects will sell. From what I experienced, this is not the case. There were plenty of inexpensive objects in the store that did not sell. Calling is a way for the objects to respond to categorization by withdrawing from customer relations.

The question of demand is also addressed negatively by the absence of objects. One day as I was putting out the catalogues, a woman asked me if I had seen any espresso-makers in the store. I said 'no, but just a few days ago I did'. She smiled and said: 'small gremlins come and take away the things I'm looking for'. This was her explanation for the fact that objects often come in large numbers and sometimes disappear altogether. I encountered this frequently, and many employees and customers remarked upon it. Another time, Zarin came to the backdoor where I was working and, when he saw that I was pricing rulers he laughed and told me that just the day before somebody had asked if we had any rulers and he had answered: ‘no, we usually don’t’. Now suddenly, the next day I was pricing four rulers at one time. Although both of these instances merely describe coincidences, and the explanation the woman offered me was not meant to represent any real scenario, they do highlight the contingency of the process. Neither the employees nor the customers can know which objects will be available for sale at any given time. And although categorisation and structure aims to stabilise the process, it is highly volatile. That means that the answer to the questions I posed to the object concerning demand is a highly situated and temporary answer that goes something like this: the customer who was looking for that object happened to be in the store on that day and happened to find it. This does not mean that the whole operation is marred by chance and coincidence, but that the response that objects offer may be very specific. The way objects speak makes it clear that they have agency in some form or other. The absence of certain objects makes people come up with fantastical rationalizations, and although the employees are used to the contingency involved they are still baffled by it.

Prices Make Things Move

The primary actors along the trajectory, therefore, are: the objects, their volume, employees as agents and employees as mobility devices, price tags, organizational categories, customers and, when the objects are not sold, the employees of recycling companies. Indirectly, of course, many other things influence the trajectory, from the building to the neighbourhood and the charities. But in this analysis I have treated those as contexts, since the influence they perform is much less tangible. All of the actors exert power to ‘move things along’, and all are essential parts of transforming the donations into commodities. In the CTS there are the donated objects, but looking at objects in the analysis, other types of objects appear as well. If objects are defined broadly in their own right —as both OOO and ANT define them—the price of an object would also be considered an object. In the CTS the price seems to have as much agency as the object itself. By putting a certain price on an object, the employees initiate a new trajectory for the object, which starts in the valuation and continues through the sale acquisition and possible use or resale by the buyer. In that sense the price has the power to move the object from the shelf and out of the CTS. Although price as an aspect of valuation has not been the primary focus in this project, it presents another way of examining the agency of second-hand objects and demonstrates that very different objects are part of practices. These are examples of how an agency-view provides a perspective on the role of objects, but also how ultimately the agency is created in relations with people. The price only moves things because somebody buys them. Objects themselves play a much more subtle role.

Ambiguity and Disorder

The contingency that is a central part of the process also creates opportunities. At the back door, valuable and treasured items appear in a box of donations, or a Star Wars bed sheet creeps in wrapped around another object. In the previous section I described how this contingency prompts individual responses and actions from the employees, and these actions are a result of the objects' physical presence. The Star Wars bed sheet was not supposed to be there but it was; and if an employee does not handle the object it just sits there. If the employees did not do something to these objects, the back area would become filled with such objects in a matter of just a few days. The more the piles grow, the more energy it takes for an employee to sort and price them. The immobility of the objects creates such repositories all along the trajectory. In the homeware department, for example, there was a box for carving knives and scissors. Most of the employees avoided this box because it was cumbersome and time-consuming to go through all of these objects. Karen eventually had to make a schedule for all the employees working in that department specifying when they had to go through the box. In cases such as this, the objects' withdrawal necessitates further organization to move them along.

Materiality and objecthood appears most vividly when highly individual objects are involved or when objects become waste. Heidegger presents the notion that things only really present themselves to us when they defy our use of them. The moment something is broken or resists its regular use—e.g., a lamp that does not switch on, etc.,—is the moment we notice its presence. Heidegger's description of this event underlines the tension between the person and the thing. The way he presents it, the notion of a struggle between the inanimate matter and the human being is accentuated, and to some extent this tension is echoed in Douglas's account of trash and in Bennett's proposal for a vibrant materiality. Douglas describes matter out of place, and in doing so she hints at the potency of disorder, the agency that matter can have when it is out of place. Heidegger is concerned with being and Douglas with social classification, but both point out that objects appear more autonomous when they defy order. Broken objects are usually discarded in the CTS, but just as waste defies order, unique object do too. I have described how Cliff had to work quite intensively to make certain artworks sellable and the frustration I felt putting out objects on the shelves when I could not fit them into categories. An important aspect of Douglas' notion is that anormalities are necessary bearers of meaning in classifaction systems as they perform the role of enforcing the system. By being uncategorizable the unique objects make the structures of categorization visible. They also make it very clear that the objects that are being valued do not make an effort to fit in.

What appears at the level of social organization as a flow of objects begins to look less fluid from the level of the interactions with individual objects. Objects withdraw from relations by falling through the structure and sitting there until somebody does something. If the system of categorization was not bound by the objecthood of the objects (and, I might add, by the materiality of the agents performing the system), one could imagine a perfect system where everything that is donated is useful, valuable and saleable—a system that creates no waste and no disruptions. But categories create abstract ideals in a messy reality. And although categorization is the primary means of creating value, the disorder the objects create is everywhere. It is not only the categories and human actions that determine the process. Tacit knowledge and ad hoc actions are evoked because of the contingency involved in the encounter between human and non-human actors. Although there is a constant direction towards organizing and structuring objects into categories, the individual nature of the donations and the objects, as well as the prominent role of the material condition of each object, interferes with the systems. The resistance to simple systems of organization highlights the role of objecthood in valuations. It is the physical *being* of the objects that determines the process, as well as the investment of human actions.

Anthropomorphic Representations

The language I have used around objects to describe their resistance anthropomorphises the objects to some extent. This is difficult to avoid altogether because part of the role the objects have in the organization and in producing value is human-like. In line with the symmetric principle, as well as Miller's and Pinney's arguments for a less anthropocentric view of materiality, treating objects as humans makes sense; but the agency that the non-hierarchical objects-as-humans indicate needs some clarification. In the valuation process it is clear that objects play a vital role that goes beyond their being the products of social relations, but whether they always *do* anything is less clear. What is clear is that as media for value-relations they are not completely transparent. They prompt valuations, they provoke sentiment and they resist categorizations. I have described the way objects *sneak in* to the organization as wrapping around other objects or as residue at the bottom of bags and boxes. Of course, the objects are completely reliant on people, donors and employees to wrap them around something or put them in a box. However the sneaking in is not something someone is doing consciously, so they are not 'being sneaked in' as an act. If the objects did not matter, less concern and energy would be put into moving them, categorizing them and valuating them. On the object level it is evident that objects are more than the sum of their social relations. The categorization transforms the objects in social terms, but this is mainly symbolic since the objects themselves stay pretty much the same. Some are cleaned and tested, a few are repaired, but largely they do not change—only perceptions of them change. The relations they enter into change and the categorization that the objects are part of serves social and cultural purposes as a way of turning discards into usable and saleable commodities in the eyes of the customers and the donors.

In the previous chapter I showed how the individual nature of the objects spurs ad hoc actions from the employees. The example of the Star Wars sheet describes this point. By zooming in on the role of the objecthood of that sheet it becomes clear that Karen's work creates the value, but also that if she had she not done anything then the objects would still be lying around. Withdrawal, as an analytical concept, points to the fact that throughout the process objects prompt action, but if that action is not performed they are still there—not as active agents but as objects that withdraw. As Morton notes, withdrawal is just a condition of the relationship. Establishing objects as something outside our relation with them facilitates an understanding of how the materiality of the objects influences valuation. The social, ethical, moral and economic values of objects are all enacted through practices in an encounter with the irreducibility of the objects. No feature of the objects is outside sense-making, outside human judgement. Withdrawal is not value- laden—it is simply a condition. This does not mean that condition does not participate in the creation of value, but what that value is is utterly social and utterly relational. Using the concept of withdrawal as an analytical tool does not only point to the instances where objects obstruct the process of valuation; it also demonstrates how the individuality of the objects allows for a number of opportunities. The contingency of the process, which mostly stems from the uncertainty of the nature of the objects and their condition, also creates positive outcomes. Some of the donations yield extremely valuable objects. But the contingency is also important at the other end of the process: when talking to customers, they expressed that 'you never know what you might find' is an important aspect of the cultural experience of second-hand stores. In other words, the fact that objects withdraw does not only constitute resistance. The 'broken' relationship that Harman talks about is not a negative property of object-human relations—it is simply a condition.

This resilience that the objects demonstrate addresses an aspect of objecthood that a processual view of materiality does not usually address. On the larger scale these objects are temporary configurations of atoms, but on the local scale they are fixed entities that resist social structures as much as they partake in them. At least that is how they appear in valuations. By insisting that objects are more than social relations, withdrawal points to the role they play as actors in these relations. In the process of transforming discards into commodities this role is expressed as that of agents in social relations and as objects that withdraw. The materiality or objecthood of these objects appears different on different levels, so if we are only looking for social relations then it is easy to overlook disorder, to equip objects with too much agency or treat every action and event as part of a larger intentional practice.

Materiality and Dirt

In the process of valuation in thrift stores the objects play a major role, but the material aspects of the objects and the practices have other effects as well. I have mentioned pollution and contamination in the sorting process, and both customers in second-hand stores and people who do not buy second-hand objects describe material properties as a dominant factor in their decision whether or not to buy used objects. One of the customers in the CTS expressed this aspect when I asked her what she would buy in a second-hand store. She said she would buy furniture but not clothes: 'I don't feel comfortable wearing clothes that someone else wore'. Elaborating further on the issue, she described the internal negotiation that is often involved in these decisions when she told me that she had seen a pair of water proof boots that she liked when she came in: 'I reckon that since they are plastic it won't be a problem'. When I asked her about what she does not feel comfortable with regarding wearing used clothes, she mentioned fungus especially. She was concerned that clothes might be infested, but she could just rub down the plastic boots and then this would not be a problem. In second-hand consumption the physical aspects of the objects are dominant in a different way than in first-hand consumption. Consumers rarely consider the potential physical danger of unused objects, and if they do so then it is mostly connected to the possibility of chemical contamination. As Gregson et al describe, a great effort is put into ridding objects of these dangers, or simply reminders of previous use; but as this example shows, contamination is as much a matter of perceptions as an actual danger. The uncertainty that is part of second-hand markets means that individual inspection become important, but also that customers make rules for themselves to avoid danger. Washing a pair of trousers or 'rubbing down' a pair of rubber boots probably relieves the problem of fungus equally well, but to this customer the material aspects of the object made a difference. Gregson et al. have described how clothing as second-hand objects, with its special relationship to the body, requires a specific set of practices to eliminate the sense of pollution. Pollution and dirt is a material issue as well as a categorical one. When Karen described the 'crap and mould' the employees have to dig through in the sorting, she was referring to stuff that sticks to your fingers and clothes, not to uncategorizable objects; dirt also appears different upon closer inspection. On this level, dirt as well as the waste that is constantly produced from the process constitutes a material resistance to the categorization.

Enacted Realities?

Objecthood at the intimate level of analysis questions the instability of objects. As Law and Mol argue, objects only appear to be stabilized, and on an organizational level this corresponds with the process in the CTS: through practices of categorization the donations are stabilized as commodities. But on an individual level, the objects appear as fixed material entities that mostly stay the same throughout the process. It is clear that the process of transformation is essential for making sense of the donation, and without social relations the objects would quickly cease to exist: they would probably end up in landfill or be ground down to material resources for industrial production. In order for the transformation to work the objects have to appear fixed. As Graeber notes, the irony is that if Western thought had not been built on this assumption then we would not know that objects are in fact constantly in motion (2001: 50).

Irreducibility is closely related to a notion of finitude and singularity in an object, and as mentioned above this is one of the properties that Mol questions in her account. Different objects are enacted through different methods, resulting in multiple objects that may or may not coincide (2002: 46). As Mol would say, enactment stabilizes objects and make them appear solid and finite to us even if they are in fact much more unstable, and this appearance is what makes humans treat them 'as if' they were fixed empirical entities. This is also—and here Graeber would agree— one of the reasons why people attach economic value to objects instead of to temporary human actions. If objects are not perceived as stable, investing a lot of money in them suddenly seems less attractive. Objectification then is closely connected with market exchange. Objectification and commodification is directly linked to the organization's aim to sell the objects and doing so facilitates relations. In the context of a thrift store it seems that in order to create value from the objects they have to be treated 'as if' they are fixed.

Benevolent Objects

In the introduction to this thesis I described the tendency to consider objects as uncanny or suspicious. Following discussions in material culture as well as in philosophy it is clear how this suspicion is linked to an anti-materialist strand in western thought that has sought to separate thinking from objects and matter. But from a practical study of objects and the practices around them, objects seem to provide a medium for value, experience and social relations while also representing consumption and materialism. Objects, upon close inspection, are very present; and perhaps it is this presence, and the fact that many objects are much more constant than human beings and will likely exist far longer than us, that accounts for both our fascination and suspicion.

Before I move on to a wider discussion of the global context and the connectivity of second-hand markets, as well as the social and environmental implications that are inevitably involved in second-hand markets, I want to bring in the two main points from the previous sections. Transforming donations into marketable commodities by creating and capturing the value they possess in social relations is a process consisting of a number of practices that are entirely social. Objects become valuable (to someone) through the enactment of practices that establish the objects as meaningful by placing them in the right context. Creating value in this context then becomes a process of making sense of what the object is and what context or category is best suited for communicating that sense. Mugs end up with other mugs or with particularly valuable objects at the register depending on what makes most sense in the context of a charity organization like the CTS. However, the process itself is prompted by objects that arrive as donations and end up as commodities; although contextually different, materially they stay the same. Through the process objects effect certain actions by their mere material presence and individuality. These effects can be considered problematic or valuable depending on the context and the nature of the effect, and the responses from the organization and its employees are equally varied. The materiality and objecthood of the objects, which I have described in a number of ways, have a major influence on their value, although none of that value is inherent. The main thing an object does is withdraw from the relation by resisting dominating structures, thereby creating contingency and disorder. On one level, this power, which I have attempted to describe in some detail, can be viewed as a form of agency in the network that imbues the objects with social powers. Although this agency is established in relations it enables objects to do things. The agentic power of objects that I encountered is in valuations is much less active.

The role of objects in valuation is equal to the role of human agents following ANT approaches as well as related processual understandings of objecthood, but in second-hand valuation the fact that objects resist categorization as much as they collaborate in producing them attests to a different kind of agency—one that does not appear socially relational. Everything that is meaningful about the role of objects is part and parcel of the social network of relations; but the residue, the objects that constantly fall through the cracks in optimized systems of transformation, is testament to the withdrawal that is the one property that objects possess. In my analysis, defining the presence of objects and their impact on valuation practices as withdrawal—instead of agency,—has allowed me to investigate the significance they have without portraying objects as active agents with the ability to do anything. Using withdrawal as an analytical tool on the level of individual object-human interactions helps highlight the fact that, no matter how perfect the system is or how well the employees perform, there is always something that does not fit. There will always be something that challenges structures and practices.

Viewed as an issue of efficiency, disorder could be seen as a lack of professionalism. But as this and other studies show, professionalization often leads to a marginalization of objects and people who do not perform optimally. In this case, given the kind of customers who need or want inexpensive but useful objects and a system in which getting the most out of donations is the primary value, a high level of adaptability is required. It is quite clear from my fieldwork that every object that is donated is carefully considered before it is discarded to ensure that nothing is thrown away that could be sold at however low a price, thus adhering to the principle of thrift. In some cases the breakdowns only mean that a new set of practices are performed, such as discarding, for example, but in many cases the objects defy routinized action altogether. As Gregson et al describe, we have to account for the way objects as part of practices also change and become insufficient or superfluous. In this section I have described cases where objects, having been rejected from previous practices, enable new practices, but also how they resist them.

Objects and Values

Through focusing on practices of valuation, I have turned this focus away from a study of a particular type of objects, going deeper into the social aspects and the relationships between actors, only to return to the objects and their role in these practices. The aim of this exercise has been to make the intangible values manifest through observing and participating in the production of values without contextualizing the objects beforehand. As the second part of the analysis demonstrates, the separation is only an abstraction, because the separation of practices and objects is impossible. However, by performing this exercise I hope to have shown that objects do play an active part in valuations through embedded agency, but mainly through resistance or withdrawal.

Although structuring and categorizing are the main vehicles for value creation, contingency and disorder are similarly important to the profitability of the second-hand trade. The difficulty of predicting what will be donated and the quality of the donations is a hindrance as well as an opportunity in the process of making discarded objects valuable. The contingency is manifested in the material objecthood of the objects as they are either remarketed or discarded.

Chapter 5: Global Flows and the Role of Thrift

Following the Global Flow

Two levels of analysis have run through the two previous chapters. One was concerned with values at the level of social organization and how making objects valuable is ultimately a social pursuit. The second addressed the role of objects in individual interactions and demonstrated the importance of considering their objecthood. Ultimately, the two levels highlight contrasting views: one focussed entirely around human actions, the other focussed around the irreducibility of objects in the world. I have attempted to demonstrate how the two actually affect valuations equally on different levels and that we therefore need to consider both aspects in order to make sense of second-hand valuations. In the final chapter I bring these perspectives together to discuss the role of the thrift store in a global context. This section addresses yet another level of analysis, namely the macro-level of global exchanges of second-hand objects. As this section acts as a discussion of the analysis as well as contextualization, I will not introduce further theoretical perspectives. Instead I will attempt to bring the literature on second-hand cultures and markets together with the meso-level analysis of social organization and value and the in-depth focus on objects.

I frame the discussion around global flow because this forms one of the possible trajectories that second-hand objects may follow. The global context therefore allows me to explore the conclusions I have made in the analysis and to show how a non-objectifying value concept that is sensitive to the role of objects can be used to analyse the further exchanges in second-hand markets. I show how the flow of objects continues beyond the thrift store and into global wholesale companies, markets and retail outlets. Moving second-hand objects between continents is an economic action that highlights the changing role of different values along the trajectory. The global trajectories are testament to the proliferation of second-hand markets, and based on the analysis I look at the consequences of this growth. The proliferation of second-hand markets brings added opportunities for the creation of economic value, but the analysis shows that other values besides economic gain are valued by the CTS organization, the employees and the customers.

Global Flows: an Explorative Study in Bangkok

Second-hand markets around the world have expanded from being particularly local markets and intimate exchanges between relatives or members of larger households to incorporating global flows of objects through wholesale vendors and online marketplaces. Although these global flows have not been the main focus of this study, they have become a significant feature of second-hand markets on a macro-scale, providing access to high-end vintage objects on the one hand and facilitating local recycling industries on the other. As a final step in my attempt to 'follow the thing' I embarked on a short (four-week) field trip to Bangkok. During my research, Bangkok had popped up as a hub for international wholesale vendors and especially for second-hand clothing. I decided to explore the trajectory and follow things across continents. Before I left to do the study I had done online research in order to identify relevant organizations and seek out local markets, and I had contacted local vendors with whom I could talk. When I left for Bangkok I had a list of appointments and markets to visit.

Arriving in Bangkok was a different experience from arriving in San Francisco. On the face of it, second-hand and recycling was not particularly visible in the city, and from my first conversations with my landlord and her family it seemed second-hand was very far from their minds. KT, my landlord, could not immediately come up with any names of shops to visit, and she told me she did not think second-hand was such a big thing in Thailand. As I began to explore, it turned out that second-hand exchanges and reuse practices were everywhere. From the guy around the corner resoling shoes to the numerous vintage shops in the large malls around Siam Square and Asok, second-hand objects were everywhere. In Terminal 21, a trendy shopping mall opened in 2011, there were several vintage stores. One of them sold redesigned clothes, another new and used American denim, and one store proclaimed to sell authentic used designer bags, although upon inspection the bags seemed more like new counterfeit ones. From my desk research I knew there were several markets, especially night markets with plenty of second-hand stuff, so on one of my first days there, while I was having dinner with KT and her family, I asked if they knew any of these markets. Suddenly it seemed that KT realized what it was I was interested in and she and her husband started telling me about all the markets they knew. Chet even emailed me later with detailed descriptions of how to get to some of the markets, with route plans and timetables. KT also told me that actually she herself engaged in second-hand exchanges: she has sold several things online on a local platform similar to eBay or craigslist. It seemed that as we started talking about what reuse and second-hand was in practice it became clear that there were plenty of examples in her everyday life and in the city as a whole. Surprisingly, I found one of the most exclusive vintage and consignment stores I have seen anywhere in a small mall in Bangkok. In general, the ways in which second-hand clothes and second-hand stores have been integrated into conventional retail spaces was surprising and the variety of outlets was enormous. During my stay in Bangkok I interviewed a wholesale company owner, two owners and buyers of vintage boutiques, the owner and employees of a small stall off Kaosan Road, the co-owner of a vintage furniture store in one of the night markets, and the owner of an antiques store just outside Bangkok. In addition, I made several visits conducting participant observation in three of the major markets and several smaller ones, visited second-hand stores, vintage stores and antique stores, and on the last day I travelled to the suburbs to visit a monastery that accepts, sorts and resells donations.

All of these observations and interviews left me with the impression that, as I had heard, second-hand was everywhere in Bangkok. Bibi, the owner of a wholesale company exporting vintage clothing around the world, told me that the combination of labour costs and the central position of Thailand between Asia and Europe had helped develop the export market. Gradually I heard from her and others how the export market had been expanded into a local market as well. According to Supra, the owner of a smart vintage store on Siam Square that sells vintage American sunglasses, glasses and jewellery, the trend for second-hand clothes was actually initially influenced from Japan. According to Supra, it was also a Japanese expat that created a local community around second-hand that has grown enormously over the last decade. Sarah, a Canadian who has been living in Bangkok on and off for more than 15 years and has been involved in the second-hand markets since they started, pinpoints the time to no more than eight years ago. Sarah owns and operates a small shop off Khao San Road and regularly sells vintage clothes at markets: ‘I remember trying to sell off some of my old American clothes around eight years ago and nobody would buy them.’ She now sells mainly to tourists in her shop, but the market where she also has a stall on some weekends is specifically local. I went there several times and was surprised at how few visitors to the market were not Thai, considering Bangkok's status as a tourist city. Talking to a few visitors confirmed this, as did Sarah. This particular market had started fairly recently and it was clear that the visitors, as well as most of the vendors, were 'into' vintage as a stylistic expression. Many of the items on sale were second-hand jeans, shoes and T-shirts in American style, as well as old Pepsi bottles and American advertising signs. There were some stalls offering Thai, Cambodian and Chinese antiques. The atmosphere was very calm, unlike the hectic night market in Chinatown or the Chatuchak market. It was clear that the market also serves as a leisure activity or a social gathering.

Night Markets

At the market I met Levi, the co-owner of a vintage furniture store at the market. Most of the stalls in the market consisted of simple racks or tables, or even just pieces of cloth spread out on the ground. A large part of the market area was a car park during the day, so all the vendors had to remove their things when the market closed. A few stalls, however, were permanent and housed in buildings around the car park. Levi's store was one of them. I had seen the building on my first visit, but the market had not really opened that day and the store building looked more like a row of garages. When I came back later on the following Saturday, the fronts of the building had all been opened to reveal a number of second-hand furniture shops. I went into several of them, and as I entered Levi's shop I noticed a number of items that looked very familiar. Upon closer inspection they turned out to be old stamps from the Danish Home Guard. As I walked round the store I noticed several other objects that were clearly Danish, and some Swedish objects as well. Fortunately, Levi, the co-owner, was there and was happy to talk to me. Like most of the other vintage and second-hand company owners I had talked to, either deliberately or by coincidence, Levi had studied in the US. In other cases the owners had studied or worked in Europe, thus many of them had experience of living abroad. This also meant that Levi spoke very good English and so communicating was easy.

I asked Levi about where he got the furniture from and he told me that they collected from a number of different sources. I was of course curious to know how they had got hold of all the Danish items: I had spotted engravings, lamps and ceramics as well as the stamps. He told me that they came from a guy that buys at Danish and Swedish flea markets and ships all of the stuff to Bangkok. ‘He has a Thai wife I think,’ he said. Levi and his partners go to his storage space a couple of times a year and pick out stuff they want to sell in their store. ‘People like it,’ he said. After we had talked for a while I asked him if I could help him in any way. He agreed and showed me to a bookshelf on the other side of the store. ‘What is this for?’ he asked, pointing to an oblong wooden box with two metal screws attached at each end. I looked and realised that he was showing me a kitchen utensil made for producing a specific Danish type of rolled meat sausage. I explained this to him and he was very pleased to know what it was for: ‘I have sold several already. I just never knew what they were.’ He also showed me a Danish bread-slicer made for rye bread and said that another visitor had told him its function.

Lotus Vintage

One of the companies I had found online before I arrived in Bangkok was Lotus Vintage. The company, which offers wholesale second-hand clothes, was started by Bibi in 2010. Although most of her stock comes from other Asian countries, she also collects clothing in Europe and the US when she is travelling.

As a wholesale company, the customer base is made up of vintage stores all over the world. When the bags of clothes arrive in Bibi's office, located in a beautiful villa in a suburban area of Bangkok, her two employees start unpacking them. The individual items are washed and checked for holes or blemishes. If any holes, tears or missing buttons are found, her employees repair them. All the sales go through the company's website, so once they item is ready they are individually photographed. Usually four photographs appear on the website of each item, showing the full garment as well as details. The items are sorted into batches of the same size and customers can go through the different batches online and pick out the items they like. Bibi sells in bulk, which means that customers must order a minimum number before they are sent out. She has customers in many parts of the world, and when I came to talk to her she told me she had just made a shipment to a Danish customer.

Moving up the Value Chain

Second-hand markets in Thailand occupy a middle position between the Global North context that I have described and the contexts described by Tranberg Hansen (2000) and Lucy Norris (2010) in Zambia and India. Without overemphasizing the comparative dimension, there are similarities with both the US context I have studied and other global markets. A lot of the second-hand objects traded in markets in Thailand originate in Cambodia, where they have been donated by the US and other countries as aid over the last forty years. They are often sold at the borders in bulk or in batches similar to those that Zambian vendors purchase from exporting companies. Unlike the African markets, the second-hand markets in and around Bangkok cater primarily to tourists and the growing middle class who are influenced by retro and vintage trends in Japan and the US. Other objects arrive as vintage commodities, but even in the global flows the relationship between gift and commodity persists. Some of the objects have been donated through Cambodian markets; others enter as commodities and go on as commodities. The values that make these objects marketable therefore share similarities with objects sold in the Global North. What I was particularly interested in was the flow from the US to Bangkok, especially in wholesale companies because they represent the next step in the trajectory the objects follow. As Bibi and Supra explain, they purchase objects in stores like the CTS on their travels in the US and sell the objects on in Bangkok.

Moving Prices

I described the role of prices as agents in the CTS, and it is clear that price is what moves objects between continents. As an agent, prices have the agency to move objects across the globe by allowing vintage shop owners to import vintage objects from the US at the right price or to sell second-hand objects to Europe and the US. Prices can move things in different ways. Bibi told me how she would only buy clothes if she could make a profit, and since the price level in the US is higher than in Taiwan, for example, she got more stuff from there. Supra, who specializes in the retail of American vintage, would get most of his stock from visits to the US. He did, however, tell me about how he and other vendors sometimes stumbled upon forgotten stockpiles of donations around Asia. These stockpiles can include unused overstock donated from the US in the 70s or 80s and then sold on to bring in huge profits: 'If you find one of those you are set for several years.'

Categories of Value in Global Exchanges

As I have described, thrift is the dominant value that drives the process of transforming donations into discards in the CTS. As the objects leave this context for the global market, other values appear to take over. Categorization is clearly still the primary tool for creating value, as Bibi showed me. This is demonstrated by the fine-tuned system in her company, which categorizes clothing to such an extent that customers can buy online almost as if they were buying new. And this primacy of categorisation in the creation of value is true true on the retail side as well. In the markets in Bangkok I observed vendors who sold second-hand boxer shorts. All the boxer shorts had been washed and inspected for tears and flaws and were presented rolled up individually with a coloured label indicating size. The level of categorization is so high that only one type of product is included and only in perfect condition. The further up the trajectory, the more like conventional industrial processes the second-hand trade becomes. Compared to the CTS, Bibi had a relatively predictable supply chain, and the objects that enter are easier to handle.

The general tendency is that the longer away the object is moved from the beginning of the trajectory, i.e., the donation, the higher the level of categorization and the less disorder is allowed. By handpicking the objects they want, Bibi, Supra and other vendors eliminate disorder and create a much more stable structure. The contingency of the objects' value is reduced by investing more time and knowledge. In Supra's and Bibi's cases the categories were recognizable even for an outsider: Bibi sold women's clothing with a focus on vintage dresses, and Supra sold eyewear and jewellery. Taste and aesthetic judgement played a huge part, but mainly in pricing levels. In Levi's case the typological categories were less obvious, but it was clear that taste and style was the common principle. The example of the sausage-press describes how the functional value and category of objects is less important when style is the overarching sorting principle.

Categorization can include many things, but the degree of specific contextualization is evident as you move up the trajectory. The specialized categorization also shows how the objects become further removed from the rubbish state. From the moment they are categorized as commodities in the thrift store, they never return to a rubbish state as long as they are bought and sold between organizations along the trajectory. Only if they leave the professional context can they return to the rubbish state. As the analysis suggests, this also means that the contingency of their value never becomes as unstable as in the 'region of flexibility' that rubbish provides. In that sense, the transformation that happens in the thrift store is not repeated as the objects enter other organizations, since they have already been transformed. The practices that are involved in moving the objects along, however, still require different forms of knowledge, and individual judgements are still vital. The criteria by which the objects are judged also appear to be similar to the thrift store valuations, but the pricing structure, especially in Lotus Vintage, is very different. As a wholesale company that applies a more industrialized approach, the pricing of individual objects is based on category and not the individual object. This means that dresses are priced similarly, as are trousers, shirts etc., and each category has a standardized price. Following the industrial logic, Lotus Vintage offers a reduction in the standard price to customers ordering larger quantities. The relative uniqueness of the objects is thereby of less importance in the sorting process inside the company, but it is important when Bibi decides what objects to source. The objects that arrived at the start of the trajectory as nondescript piles of donations and were then individualised through the transformative practices in the thrift store become standardized categorical items in the wholesale company. As the objects are sold on, some of them are individualized again in vintage stores; but since customers buy in bulk from Lotus Vintage, most of the objects are presented in stores together with similar prices organized into categories and sizes.

I have presented the global flow as though it involves only two or three actors: the thrift store, a wholesale company and a retail outlet. Although this is often the case, the trajectory can be considerably longer. Bibi was very helpful and open about most aspects of how she runs her company: she happily told me everything I wanted to know about sorting structures, pricing, organizational values, the customer base, and so on. The only time she answered evasively was when I asked about the specifics of her suppliers. A lot of the clothes she picks out herself in markets, but she also buys from other vendors. She told me that mostly these vendors were local, but that they also had sub-suppliers. Without going into details she said that often it is a long line of sub-suppliers that buy, sort and sell on. Therefore the actual trajectory can be very hard to pinpoint. I am sure that some of her reluctance to divulge the secrets of her supply chain was due to the competitive nature of the second-hand trade. I have met secrecy at all levels and witnessed the ferocity with which vintage retailers protect their sources. In many cases, competition is the main reason for such secrecy, but as Alexander and Reno (2012) point out, the connection between disposal and criminality is well documented. I quickly realized that this was also the case in Bangkok. Sarah described to me how when she was offered to buy second-hand clothes from vendors she was often told that they came from a cousin of the vendor. She also described how second-hand objects would 'fall off' trucks and end up in markets. She cautioned me not to pursue this aspect. Due to time issues I was not able to dig further into this connection; but whether illegal trading or crime is involved or not, the objects may have changed hands many times before arriving at a retail outlet.

The Proliferation of Second-hand Markets

The markets in Thailand are new, as Bibi, Sarah and Subra all told me, and they represent just one new hub in the global flows. The success of second-hand industries all over the world has created increased competition both between charity organizations and between private companies. In the UK, representatives of charities have complained publicly that private sorting companies are taking many of their donations, and I have heard Danish charities lament the loss of high quality donations because of competition from online market places and consignment stores. Mostly they agree, however, that there seems to be plenty of unwanted but usable stuff out there to satisfy the different actors. This increased competition has meant that many charities are moving towards a more industrialized process and are introducing centralized sorting facilities, online shops and selective high-end stores. In Goodwill in the US I was able to observe the centralized sorting and valuation in the organization's large facility in downtown San Francisco and witness how the donations were differentiated between different shops and locations. The increased industrialization allows the charities to systematize and organize the process to a greater degree and move things to where they are able to fetch the highest economic value. As another example, a Danish charity collects objects that are in high demand from their stores around the country to sell them at a higher price in the larger cities. Another Danish charity even employs an appraiser.

In several of the charities I interviewed, the responsibility towards the employees, and especially the volunteers, had a high priority. Imposing more market-based valuations and industrial practices has resulted in a loss of autonomy for individual shops and individual volunteers. As I have shown, respecting individual valuations is crucial in the CTS and it seems to be reflected in the other charities as well. This responsibility stems from an acknowledgement of the work they do and the fact that they are often pivotal in the success of charity organizations. Chibnik (2011) has described the difficulties and dangers of trying to estimate the monetary value of the work the volunteers do, and the charities I have worked with regard them simply as invaluable to the operation.

As economic rationality becomes more widespread, the role of volunteer work may be considered differently. The further up the trajectory, the less volunteer work is performed. Of course, the main reason for this is that the actors further up are private companies. More charities, however, are also hiring paid employees to manage shops and ensure the efficient operation of the organization. As the economic value grows, it seems that other values are diminished. Thrift, the dominant value in the CTS, often opposes economic value, especially where efficiency is concerned, but thrift is responsible for the way the valuations are performed. The question, therefore, is what effects growing professionalization have on second-hand markets.

Thrift in Global Flows

The thrift shops at the beginning of the trajectory provide the work needed to make the most of the donations and to make as many objects available as possible. Over the years I have often heard the claim from owners of private vintage shops that the only reason the thrift stores are able to spend so much time on valuations and to sell the objects at low prices is because of the volunteer work involved: it would simply not be viable if you had to pay workers to perform all of these practices. Taking Chibnik's caution to heart, I will not try to calculate whether or not this is true, but argue that it is not so much the economic aspect as the rationalization behind it that determines the viability. Again and again I heard that a good reason for setting up wholesale companies in Bangkok was that the expenses in terms of pay were negligible. So the expenses were not the primary reason for applying a more conventional industrial structure. In the CTS, on the other hand, most of the employees were paid workers. The difference is tied to the values that the organizations have as much as material constraints.

As an additional reflection on local and global values, I will mention a charity I visited outside Bangkok. On one of the last days I was there I was told that just outside the city was a Buddhist monastery that accepted donations and resold them to raise money for charity. On the last day I was able to visit the monastery, and after a long journey I found a five-storey warehouse filled with donations of all kinds. It was clear that the customers were vendors from markets in Bangkok who were here buying objects for resale, and just outside the gates of the monastery a whole village of antique shops had sprung up. I talked to one of the owners who told me that she bought objects from the monastery and sold them on. She had had several visitors from Scandinavia, she said: ‘they come once a year and buy many things at once’. In the monastery I observed people repairing and cleaning donations, and in the antique shops the objects were carefully selected and presented. Just like in the US, the actions of the thrift store provide the initial sorting and transformation while further along the private companies are able to make use of the transformation to increase the economic value.

It seems that thrift as a value is marginalized in global exchanges as economic value takes over. Social value persists, but only as an order of value; the specific social values that are created are different. As a wholesale company, Lotus Vintage does not accentuate customer experience in the same way as the CTS. Bibi described social value as trust and reliability in the interaction between the company and her customers. Making the best use of resources is certainly a concern in a company like Lotus Vintage, but clothes that are not up to standard are not sold at a lower price. Clothes that can be repaired without affecting their condition are repaired, but otherwise they are discarded. Being thrifty is also less important further up the trajectory because of the sorting that takes place before the objects even enter the company. There is simply less need to be thrifty, since much of the mess never enters the organization. Material condition is still of high importance further up the trajectory. Supra described to me the hierarchy of used, second-hand and vintage, where 'vintage' describes objects that are old but have never been used and should preferably still have their original labels or tags. The visual appearance of use is even less attractive at this point in the trajectory. In general there is very little room for dirt and disorder the further up the objects move. Just like the standardization that is achieved through an industrial logic, minimizing dirt also attests to the diminishing focus on the material aspects of the objects the greater the focus is on economic value.

From a global perspective, objects appear to be flowing from continent to continent and in and out of wholesale companies, market stalls and retail outlets. Although many individual actions and organizations may be involved in the way dresses, for example, move from Taiwan to Thailand to Denmark, or glasses move from the US to Thailand and stamps from Denmark to Thailand and onwards to other countries, the flow seems relatively unhindered. Analysis of the individual interactions and the withdrawal of objects makes it clear that objects do not just flow up the value chain and in and out of different states. They are laboriously picked up, put in crates, sold, bought, categorized, cleaned, sold, bought, repaired and so on. Each of the actions involved is paramount to the creation of value, but in the global flow contexts appear to be the dominant criteria for value. Thrift, as a highly local value, does not move objects; rather it is economic value that does.

Doing Good through Commodification

The role of a charity like the CTS is to generate profit for charities, but a vital aspect of the way the organization runs is by providing good for the community. Speaking to Armun when I returned, he was adamant that they needed to reconnect with the local community, and the organization's acceptance of patrons napping in the furniture department, etc., all attest to the organization's commitment. After all, it is called the Tavern Guild *Community* Thrift Store. I have described this as features that place the thrift store in a gift-like exchange category. The emphasis on maintaining relations and not focusing solely on exchanging alienable goods creates a human economy (Graeber 2012). Graeber describes human economies as economies that recognize that any system of the distribution of material goods is mainly about the creation of people and social relations (2012b: 412). In fact a dominant purpose of the CTS is providing a service to the community. The CTS began as a means for members of the gay community in San Francisco to generate funds for sufferers of HIV and AIDS and now helps a host of people to donate to different charities. The CTS facilitates this gift-giving by transforming discards into commodities. Unlike the conventional distinction between gift- and market-based economies, human economies can be used to sell and buy material goods, but they serve other purposes as well. As Graeber says, human economies can also function as means of making amends (2012b: 413). The CTS provides an opportunity for members of the community to get redemption from over-consuming. It also provides solace for people who have recently lost a relative or partner. Doing good for the community goes hand in hand with making money, but this can only be understood as an expression of thrift. To return to Cliff's statement, the purpose of a thrift store is not to sell objects at the highest possible price in the most convenient way; it is about providing as much good for the community as possible. And doing that requires a set of practices arranged around transforming donations—gifts—into commodities in a way that balances economic, social and emotional values. Being thrifty is the infravalue that allows this to happen. One of the ways this is possible is through private buyers buying a lot of the stuff the CTS sells. And this process links the thrift store, with its particular set of values, to the global network.

Wider Effects of Thrift

The way I have presented the work of the CTS as mainly providing services for the community refers to the analytical way of making sense of the values at stake. The practical work, as I have shown, is much more physical: objects need to be sorted and priced. So the CTS does good by marketing physical objects. In terms of values the objects are just means to an end, but for the second-hand market the objects are essential. As a by-product of the organization's work providing services to the community, they make thousands of objects available to the buyers and customers in the store. As the objects move further up the trajectory, thrift becomes less and less dominant as a value by which organizations are run and objects are sorted.

In one charity I interviewed, the pricing structure of a thrift store was explained to me as a calculation of the expenses per square meters in the store divided by the number of donated objects. As the manager told me: 'this always results in a price that is way below the market price'. According to a thrift principle, however, it takes into account that objects have to be sold to make room for new ones while making sure that as many of the donations are used as possible. Thrift, with its priority of not being wasteful, ensures that the CTS and other charities make the most of the donations and bring as much as possible to market, while private companies that are not driven by thrift but by economic values are more focused on making the most economic gain possible from the objects they handle. As the professionalization of the second-hand industries increases, some charity organizations adopt similar values in order to increase their economic gain from individual objects. The proliferation of second-hand markets has resulted in higher prices for second-hand objects in high demand, and some organizations are trying to capitalise on this increase. While doing so may help bring in more money on individual objects, there is a risk of sacrificing other values in the process. As the global trajectory demonstrates, increased categorization and contextualization are the tools employed to increase economic value up the trajectory. In this process, objects that do not fit in are at risk of being neglected. Increased contextualization also requires moving things more. In the Danish example given above, it is clear that the employees in local stores do not always see the value of giving up their most valuable objects to a store where they are more likely to fetch a higher price. Overlooking the employees' autonomy in valuations can have negative results. On a larger scale, the increased professionalization of second-hand industries has other consequences as well.

Objectification and Material Use

I based my analysis of valuations on Graeber's notion that what people in fact put value on are social relations. His theory goes against the objectification of value and he argues that understanding objects as materially fixed is inherently linked to market-based economies. If objects are not self-referential then they cannot be sold (2001, 2012a). In the second part of the analysis I brought the analysis down to the level of objects and described how they appear as objects in individual interactions and how this appearance is essential for the valuation. While it seems that social relations are absolutely essential to the value the CTS creates, as a human economy what is really valuable is the good the organization creates. The objects are a means to an end. This is an important point if the main objective is to remind people that human beings are important, not inanimate objects; but if you approach the subject from a resource perspective then it seems people do not value objects enough.

One type of object of which there were always plenty in the CTS were vases. Some of them were handmade, some were large and some were old, but most of them were almost identical, industrially-produced vases of the kind you get with flowers in at the florists or in supermarkets. These vases were by-products of consumption, but substantial enough for people not to throw them away. So they donate them instead. The vases do not represent any real value to the CTS because they are a type of product that usually comes with another product, and few customers buy them. The vases still represent a material object, however, and that means they needs to be handled, sorted and priced. Even if they are not sold they have to be moved and recycled. In this case it seems that the object is not regarded highly enough, much less objectified. Graeber argues that: 'both natural theology and political economy starts from the assumption that value is primarily a power of creation…' (2012a: 288). He goes on to point out that, in spite of this assumption, most labour is spent adjusting, refashioning and repairing rather than transforming or creating anything. More time is spent on ensuring that things stay the same than on transforming them, and here perhaps lies the clue to how, on an abstract (and physical) level, materiality is a flow of particles and objects are temporary assemblages of these particles in a constant process of becoming (Heidegger) and decay (Graeber); but on an everyday level these objects are manifest self-identical things that take up space and withdraw from us. So although value is social and objects are really only temporary assemblages, by disregarding the materiality of objects in the everyday experience of handling them, the risk is that they will continue to pile up. While a non-objectifying value concept is useful in social research, since it makes value accessible through the study of social practices, in individual interactions the objecthood of objects is significant. I have described earlier how an object-oriented but non-objectifying approach could look, and in terms of addressing waste and resource issues this approach questions whether disregarding the materiality of objects leads to a more considered use of material resources. I realize that the example of the vases is a single case, but it demonstrates how, in a culture that is often described as materialistic, material objects seem to matter very little.

Systemic Approaches to Resource Issues

Judged purely on their economic performance, thrift stores are not the most efficient form of organization in second-hand markets; but as handlers of the remainders of consumption the organizations make use of every thing they possibly can. In doing so they are able to provide commodities for a variety of customers and supply local markets as well as global trajectories. By seeing the donations as material objects that disrupt and challenge structures, and by adjusting to the individuality of the objects, thrift stores create social and emotional as well as economic value in the process. What they also do is to minimize waste. Handling objects is in a sense a by-product of the thrift store's commitment to the community, but by investing energy and concern into the practices of valuation the CTS is able to transform somewhat unmanageable discards and to extract as much value from them as possible. In the process they minimize the amount of discards that go to recycling or landfill. On a large scale, thrift can appear an inefficient way to manage discards, and in municipal resource strategies as well as in zero-waste initiatives the focus is often on material recycling instead. Breaking down objects to raw materials is a more economically efficient process that allows for more industrial structures by minimizing contingency and disorder. Large-scale approaches to waste reduction and ecological crises, such as cradle-to-cradle principles (McDonough & Braungart 2002), present valuable systemic solutions, but often these require large-scale changes in production systems that are difficult to achieve. Focusing on the reality of handling discards presents a more situated approach.

Throughout this thesis, discard studies as an amorphous sub-field have provided a lens on second-hand markets. Much of the literature I have addressed has been absorbed by this sub-field, but more importantly I have adopted the queer perspective of discard studies that highlights the local, the mundane and the uneven remainders (Schaffer 2014). As a response to systemic approaches, discard studies demonstrate how, although valuable, systemic approaches do not approach discards, reuse or recycling at the local level. The reluctance to approach discards eye-to-eye tends to simplify waste issues. Discard studies also show how all systems produce waste, so that no matter how efficiently organized there will always be remainders (Alexander & Reno 2012). Approaching second-hand markets through ethnographic fieldwork has allowed me to access discard practices from the ground, and the analysis of both social organization and individual encounters has shown that, although the thrift store does not provide any complete solution to waste issues, it does provide local solutions to local problems. While being a disorderly and time-consuming set of practices, transforming discards into commodities through making the best use of resources provides a valuable and situated approach to waste reduction.

In this thesis I have presented the process of transforming discards into commodities as being at the intersection between both economic and social structures. In symbolic terms the process has also been seen to signify very different things. The two cultural theorists Walter Benjamin and Theodor Adorno presented wildly conflicting views on the meaning of reclaiming discards. While Benjamin saw rag-picking as a way of reinstalling lost use-value, Adorno described it as the 'ultimate form of capitalism' whereby the last drop of exchange value is extracted as the rag-picker repossesses the object (Smith 2010). In Benjamin's account the loss is central, and he expresses a romantic view of the individual creative and eclectic act represented in the rag-picker. Adorno sees rag-picking as an expression of an economic structure based on self-interest. Reclaiming and sorting discards in both cases is a practice of making sense of the abject, the repressed. Reclaiming the object into the realm of things that can be dominated is the main objective of the categorization of discards, and in the analysis I have described both the structural and the individual aspects of the process and how people and objects affect the process differently at different levels. Withdrawal makes the need for individual action apparent and shows why thrift is so important in this context. In the global context, the materiality of objects is largely marginalized, but in thrift stores the objects represent a very physical reality. In second-hand markets both creativity and economic gain drive the trajectory.

In this chapter I have described how moving second-hand objects between continents is an economic action that highlights the changing role of different values along the trajectory. Community value stays local while economic gain drives global exchange. The proliferation of second-hand markets brings added opportunities for the creation of economic value, but my analysis shows that other values besides economic gain are valued by the organization, the employees and the customers. The growing professionalization of the industry should therefore be considered in relation to a host of values and not just economic value. Thrift stores are efficient actors in salvaging the value of discards, and the ethnographic findings show how the combination of paid and volunteer workers enables an efficient transformation of discards into commodities. They also show how labour intensive a process it is and how the materiality of the objects constantly creates extra work. Based on the findings, I argue that the growing professionalization of second-hand industries can lead to a less efficient use of the material donations, and since the thrift stores provide other forms of value besides economic value, this can lead to an overall devaluation of second-hand markets.

Chapter 6

In Conclusion

The history of private consumption shows how what is thought of as waste today was previously part of the economy of the household (Strasser 2000). Sorting and collecting various discards was a standard practice and trading or selling these discards was an integral aspect of household economy. As consumers were taught to get rid of old things and stop saving scraps, however, reuse and recycling was externalized and turned over to municipalities or private companies. From having once been considered a source of income, discards became something consumers often had to pay to get rid of, and thus waste became part of an industrialized economy. Recent changes in waste management and public attitudes towards waste suggest that discards are now again beginning to be seen as resources. This shift can clearly be seen in San Francisco's Zero-Waste programme, for example, and the recent change in the name of a large Danish incineration plant to that of a 'Resource Centre'. The enormous growth in flea markets and online sales of second-hand items indicate a change in consumer culture as well, from discarding and occasionally donating to extracting either money or other goods from the resources. This is perhaps a reaction to an increased awareness of looming resource scarcity; though, following Adorno's critique, it might also be the 'ultimate form of capitalism' in which nothing is left unexploited.

The Transformation of Discards

The study I have presented here describes the everyday practices of transforming discards into commodities in the context of a thrift store. In the analysis I have described how thrift, as a considered use of resources and a striving not to be wasteful, is the primary infravalue in the CTS organization. This is what allows the organization to provide services to the community through creating social, emotional and economic value. What Strasser described as a household value in the 19th century is still the operating principle in this human economy, but as the objects move on up the trajectory it becomes a value that is increasingly at odds with other values.

The object of this study has been to shed light on an area of contemporary cultural economy which, in spite of continual growth and dissemination, has so far only attracted the attention of a small group of researchers. The study adds to a growing body of literature documenting the practices, exchanges and trajectories in second-hand markets. In the UK, Nicky Gregson, Louise Crewe and others have documented the domestic consumption culture as well as a variety of outlets and types of practices involved in discarding, donating, selling and buying, and Julie Botticello has described the sorting that takes place in professional sorting facilities. On a global scale, Lucy Norris, Mike Crang et al., and Karen Tranberg Hansen have described how second-hand objects and practices around these objects are constituted in local cultures. The role of the charity sector has been described in studies as well as historical and social institutions. In this study I have brought together insights from this body of literature to describe in detail the practices of valuation in a charity organization in the US, focusing on the interaction between practices, objects and values.

The starting point for this study was an interest in the growing trade in second-hand objects around the world. Over the last twenty years, used objects have shaken off the connotation of poverty and social stigma in popular culture and have become prominently displayed in magazines and shops all around the globe. High-end vintage shops are now staples of mainstream shopping streets and have even entered shopping malls. Charity thrift stores have also spread enormously and many of the organizations report constant growth. Nevertheless, second-hand markets are still considered somewhat alternative. The growing body of literature on second-hand from cultural, social and economic perspectives demonstrates that, in spite of this marginal position, second-hand objects facilitate a myriad of practices at both local and global levels and that they are part of both gift-like and commodity exchanges. In order to understand what drives these markets, the first part of this study consists of an enquiry into how value is created in second-hand markets. I began by identifying the objects in second-hand markets in states between consumption and waste and waste and market, describing how second-hand markets include both conventional and alternative forms of exchange.

Values are an elusive subject to study and I decided to approach the subject through social actions as they are routinized into practices of valuation. The practice approach made values tangible as something-people-do and allowed me to focus throughout the study on concrete bodily and mental activities, forms of knowledge, and objects and their use. Valuations as a specific form of practice became the main focus of this study because they manifest the organizational structures, social and cultural contexts and material conditions of the types of exchange that take place in second-hand markets. I conducted the study using ethnographic methods and the main fieldwork was carried out as a form of apprenticeship in which I worked with and was taught by the employees and volunteers in the Tavern Guild Community Thrift Store in San Francisco. By working my way through all the different stations on the trajectory through the organization I became intimately familiar with the practices. The ethnographic approach created a situated view of the forms of social organization in and around the CTS, and through embodied learning I also experienced the individual interactions between people and objects. I presented my ethnography of the CTS with a focus on the practices involved in valuation. The ethnography describes in some detail the number of routinized practices as well as ad hoc decisions involved. In the analysis I approached these practices on different levels in order to get to grips with what was otherwise a complex interconnected mesh of people, objects and structures.

The first part of the analysis focused on the level of social organization and drew on an anthropological theory of value. In order to establish a value concept that is sensitive to the mixed economic setting of which thrift stores are a part, I arrived at a relational approach put forward by David Graeber, building on the long legacy from Mauss. Graeber's aim is to liberate our understanding of value from the fetishized object and reorient the study of value in commodities into a study of actions and social relations. What people find valuable are not objects but relations around them. Through the analysis it becomes clear how values in second-hand markets are created through practices of valuation that create relations between both human and non-human actors. In fact, separating the two would be to miss important facets of the exchanges that take place. The transformations of the objects are carried out through a number of practices and actions in a process that aims to organize and make sense of the donations. The organization assumes responsibility for the objects when they accept donations, and from the back door the objects are distributed and sorted in the different departments. Through a series of practices, the organization transforms the donations into commodities. This transformation is an ongoing effort to minimize the disorder that is a dominant feature of the process, from the composite nature of the donations to the ambiguity of certain objects and the uncertainty of the supply. The employees battle disorder through routinized practices and ad hoc actions, but disorder also creates opportunities for value. In the contingency that characterizes the process, objects of great worth emerge and disorder attracts customers to the store.

Through a focus on the social practices of valuation, the analysis showed how different types of values and criteria influence valuations. Although the raison d'être of the organization is to raise money for charities, several other values affect the valuations. In negotiating between these values a number of criteria are activated, and I describe the three main criteria as condition, demand and relative uniqueness. These criteria are responsible for pricing, but pricing involves more than economic rationality. In the CTS, social, emotional and community values as well as personal values are considered important and these affect the valuations in different ways. Overall, thrift appears as the dominant value, or infravalue. Thrift is not an end in itself, however, but supports other values. Even so, thrift emerges as the principle that allows the organization to provide a number of services to the community by transforming discards into commodities in the least wasteful manner it can. The number of actions required only makes sense if analysed as an expression of thrift. From a social value perspective, the objects could be priced lower and the organization could do more to prioritize the community. From an economic perspective, less low value objects could be accepted and more discarded in order to focus energy on objects that bring in more money. But making the most of the donations is the guiding value that balances economic, social and emotional responsibilities. In terms of value it is clear that, no matter how manifest the value of an object seems, it is through the social context and the actions around the objects that value is created. The object is a medium for value, but this does not mean the medium is transparent. In fact the material condition of the object is the first criteria by which objects are measured and represents the primary opportunity for creating value for the organization.

In the second part of the analysis I focused on the role of objects in the social practices of valuation. Through a critical reading of the literature on materiality, objects and agency in material culture I introduced a philosophical concept to account for the role of objects outside their social agency. By using the concept of withdrawal from object-oriented ontology, as an analytical tool more than an ontological assumption, I analysed how objects affect valuations. I described how different objects have agency that is expressed in different ways through the process of valuating, selling and 'calling' objects. The agency makes objects move, but at this level the objects appear as rather solid entities that need individual handling and action. As objects withdraw from relations they obstruct the flow through the organization, though not through action but mainly by not doing anything. Objects fall out of the flow and remain there until someone does something. Through an analysis of the ethnographic account I showed how objects can be seen to withdraw from organizing structures by disrupting the flow. It is clear how the everyday perception of objects as something more than a sum of relations is crucial to understanding the value of second-hand objects. In fact I would add that the appearance that objects have of consistence and material integrity only demonstrates how contextual and social their value is, since an object can transform from a worthless discard to a valuable commodity without any material alteration.

In chapter five, which acts as a discussion and adds perspectives on the role of the thrift store in a global context, I presented a smaller explorative study that I conducted in Bangkok. I followed the trajectory of second-hand objects and in Bangkok I explored the next step on the journey that the objects take around the world. I described the route of both Danish and American goods being sold on to Asian markets and Asian vintage clothing being sold wholesale to Europe and the US. Based on the findings from my analysis I showed how value is created and how thrift is substituted for other values along the trajectory. The further from the donation, the more industrialized the process becomes. As the last chapter describes, the social, cultural and environmental discourse that second-hand markets are part of has many implications. In the context of this study I have argued that thrift is a necessary value in the process of turning discards into commodities because it allows the organization to devote time and energy to objects that would be considered worthless if other values were adhered to. Although thrift is replaced in the global flows, it is crucial in the early stages for subsequent actors in the market as well as for the community that the thrift store serves.

By dividing the analysis into levels and treating particular phenomena as the focus, flows, social organization and objects appear differently on the different levels. On the global level, objects move smoothly from context to context, usually up the trajectory in terms of economic value. On the organizational level, objects also flow but it becomes clear how many individual actions are required for them to flow. Every object requires individual handling and yet, through a high level of organization and allowance for disorder and contingency, the transformation can take place. On the intimate level, objects appear as fixed entities that are very present, and what seemed on the level of the organization to form part of a flow now seem to resist as much as they cooperate. Different objects have different forms of agency along the trajectory and at different levels, and the closer you look the less active and yet more effectual the objects appear. I have described this form of effect as withdrawal instead of agency, since the objects mainly resist and remain unless someone does something.

The Matter of Objecthood

The process of transformation in second-hand markets clearly demonstrates how the physicality of objects is stable; but as the contexts change, and with the investment of human energy and concern, they become valuable again. In an attempt to de-stabilize objects as constant carriers of intrinsic value, Graeber makes an ontological claim for a processual understanding of materiality. In an earlier chapter I have described the challenges of applying this ontology in social research by describing the everyday approach to objects that I encountered in the CTS and how objects appeared as stable entities in the world. In fact the objects as material configurations were about the most constant or unchangeable in the organization. Values, categories, practices and trajectories changed constantly. The transformation I describe is essentially a social transformation. While a processual view on materiality helps embed objects into social processes, there may be something else that objects do—or do not, as the case may be. I suggest that in addition to an openness to the sociomaterial entanglement of social processes, in order to understand the role of objects as materiality and social categories we need to look at their objecthood. By addressing this objecthood through the lived experience of performing valuations on a daily basis, I argue that although materiality is fluid and objects only appear stable as part of social enactments, in order to make sense of their role in creating value in second-hand markets it is imperative to acknowledge their presence as objects.

Thrift in Context

Thrift stores are efficient actors in salvaging the value of discards, and the ethnographic findings show how the combination of paid and volunteer workers enable an efficient transformation of discards into commodities. These findings also show how labour-intensive this process of transformation is and how the materiality of the objects constantly creates extra work. The materiality of the objects, and especially their objecthood, appears to have quite an impact on the valuations, but in a larger context of which second-hand markets are inevitably a part the focus on materiality can also suggest other effects. Addressing the role of second-hand markets and the value of used objects it is almost impossible to escape the question of the environment and how second-hand consumption relates to matters of sustainability. In the foregoing analysis I have attempted to circumvent this discussion in order to address other matters and to avoid normative statements and emotional reasoning. It is absolutely central to the understanding of values as social relation-building, however, to include perceptions of the environmental values of second-hand objects—especially regarding the waste and resource issue. In this study, thrift appears as a pivotal concept in understanding second-hand markets, particularly at the beginning of the trajectory. As I have mentioned, thrift practices predate industrial production, and as practices focused around the remainders of consumption, transforming discards cannot be understood only in terms of industrial economic efficiency. I suggest that the marginal position also accounts for why reuse industries are rarely included in systemic solutions to waste management. Second-hand markets are too messy and are not entirely structured by economic rationality. In that sense, second-hand objects remain the remainders not only of consumption but of environmental strategies as well. Graeber argues that reuse is considered part of the household and not of recycling systems because there is no exchange of property right. As this study has shown, second-hand markets exist at the intersection between the household—or private consumption—and markets, since property rights are abandoned but only to a certain extent. In the logic of human economy, the donation—the gift—establishes relations even when economic exchanges are also involved. The distinction between reuse and recycling, which is Graeber's point, underlines the precarious position that second-hand exchanges inhabit. The distinction that Marx makes between productive and reproductive labour, between industry and the household, describes the way value is assigned to these two spheres. The feminist critique of this distinction explains how the work that thrift stores do is marginalized by not adhering to the same logic as production. Thrift practices do not represent systemic solutions but are concerned with local matters.

Professionalization and Thrift

As the markets for second-hand goods grow, commercial actors enter and introduce economic rationality, and this has influenced charity organizations and the way their thrift stores are run. The global flow demonstrates how thrift is substituted for other values along the trajectory and how the practices of valuation become more industrialized the further away from the donation the objects move. Economy moves objects across continents, but the locally embedded values do not travel with them. The influence of professional actors risks eliminating the thrifty way that discards are handled in favour of a more economically efficient but more wasteful practice. Based on the findings, I have argued that the growing professionalization of second-hand industries can lead to a less efficient use of material donations, and because thrift stores provide more value than just economic value this leads to an overall devaluation of second-hand markets. Focusing on social value makes it clear that there is nothing intrinsic about the value of objects. In the analysis I described how the objects come to matter in the valuation, and in the discussion I argued that while realizing the value of social relations helps people focus on what is really important, disregarding the materiality of objects is likely to result in even more material waste. Thrift is not about fetishizing the object but about a considered relation with its objecthood. In this way, more concern for the object may result in less material waste.

I started this study by questioning the position of second-hand markets as a form of alternative exchange, and throughout the study I have described some differences and similarities between conventional industrial practices and those that transform discards into commodities. In the process I found that what separates the thrift store from its commercial partners and competitors are the values that drive the organization. Although thrift stores are part of a global market that is becoming more professionalized and industrialized as it grows, thrift stores represent an alternative approach to value creation that is useful both for the market-driven economy, on the one hand, and for the community on the other. The thrift store embodies these two in a human economy of people, objects and relations.

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