

## Market Hydraulics and Subjectivities in the “Wild”: Circulations of the Flea Market

By Niklas Hansson & Helene Brembeck

### Abstract

Since consumer researchers started paying attention to flea markets they represent common consumer and market research objects. Arguably, in the “natural laboratory” of the flea market, researchers can observe and theorize market and consumer processes “in the wild”, as forms of direct marketing and consumption. We build on existing flea market research through adopting a circulatory approach, inspired by actor-network theory (ANT). Rather than presenting a theory of (flea) markets, ANT is useful for studying markets from the perspective of grounded market-making processes. Consumption is understood as the interplay of consumers, marketers, retailers, and a wide array of artifacts and market mediators like products, economic theories and ideas, packaging, market space (in the physical sense) and furniture, etc. Our results point out that not only does such an approach enable analysis of features commonly studied within consumer research such as calculative action and social interaction, but also issues more rarely in focus in such research, such as cognitive patterns of consumer curiosity, emotions, senses, and affect. Furthermore, even though flea markets foremost are places of commerce and exchange of second hand goods, there is a large variety of other forms of flows or circulations going on “backstage” that enable the surface phenomena of second hand consumption to come into being. Many of these circulations, we argue, are material rather than immaterial. Vendor and buyer subjectivities are thus understood as outcomes of circulatory dynamism that involves a range of material and immaterial flows.

**Keywords:** Flea markets, actor-network theory, circulation, consumption, second-hand, subjectivity, Cochoy

## Introduction

The purpose of this article is to present an ethnographic case study of *Kommersen*, a local flea market in Gothenburg, Sweden, and discuss the results within the framework of circulation as part of an actor-network theory (ANT) approach. More generally, the text discusses the role of circulation for understanding flea markets and flea market consumption. Presenting an ANT approach to our study of flea markets is important because it is not really a (flea) market theory but more interested in grounded market(s) making processes. In other words, an ANT approach to consumption research of flea markets is the analysis of “outdoor” or “wild” actions, rather than taking its cue from formalised market or consumer behaviour terminology (Callon & Rabeharisoa 2003).

Consumer research on flea markets has been limited, (cf. Sherry 1990; Crewe & Gregson 1997), perhaps because of their character as a “functional anachronisms” (Belk, Sherry & Wallendorf 1988) or historic leftovers of an “archaic marketplace” (Abrahams 1986). Arguably, in the “natural laboratory” (Sherry 1990: 13) of the flea market, researchers can observe and theorize market and consumer processes in the “wild”, as forms of direct marketing and consumption. However, flea markets are not only characterized by specific market or exchange mechanisms, but also by the particular forms of subjectivity that they encapsulate; for example the explorer who travels flea markets as intensified places where things are re-enchanted and become bargains, and where the seeking consumer finds pleasure in cluttered market displays (e.g. Ottoson 2008; Parsons 2010; Duffy, Hewer & Wilson 2012). We build on these two strands of flea market research by adopting a circulatory approach, highlighting essential *display mechanisms* and *consumer flow logics* inside flea markets and propose flea market spatiality and consumer-seller-thing interaction as deeply embodied and affective in nature.

With the metaphor of “market hydraulics” we introduce an approach towards flea markets that focuses on the fluid character of consumption and the circulatory essence of (flea) markets. With a view of markets as spaces with hydraulic characteristics, we include “hardware” like technologies and logistics in order to understand some of its basic circulatory mechanisms. Not only desks but also for example wheeled devices or ails contribute to shape circulation of goods and people (cf. Ottoson 2008: 106).

A circulatory approach towards markets also means that we are studying flea markets through disclosing *the many different forms of circulation* that undergird them. We know for example that in entering a market place circulation might be restricted and different from the public space outside (we cannot bring anything along when we enter without for example wrapping it in paper or placing it in a private bag). We might also leave with a bag or shopping cart full of purchases, if

we have paid for them. But, circulation means not only *flows of goods and people* in (side) and out of market spaces, or the attribution of particular tools to control and amplify particular *circulations inside market places* (cf. market stands, shelves or aisles), but also the *circulations (conduits) that afford particular subjectivities, affects, atmospheres and agencies to emerge*. Not only do particular movements (moving consumers) add to the fluid character of markets, but also *affective and cognitive motions*. Affective arousals (intensified states caused by for example sensations, perceptions and feelings) may emerge from the sheer presence of bodies being pulled and pushed together in a room bumping in to each other.

## Theoretical Framework

From an actor-network theory (ANT) perspective, consumption is understood as the interplay of consumers, marketers, retailers, and a wide array of artifacts and market mediators like products, economic theories and ideas, packaging, carts, market space (in the physical sense) and furniture, etc. (Brembeck et al 2007; Cochoy 2007). ANT is basically about circulating entities; “the *summing up* of interactions through various kinds of devices, inscriptions, forma and formulae, into a very local, very practical, very tiny locus” (Latour 1999: 17). Circulating and emerging patterns of actions are therefore its home terrain and fits the wild nature of flea markets as an alternative market network complementing conventional retail operations (cf. Sherry 1990). The ways that available devices and objects, space and goods intervene and control flows of goods, choices, identities and the manner in which commercial or economic action depends on the material setting has not been thoroughly researched. The fact that the form of “market devices” (Cochoy 2007) and furniture available in a regular supermarket space and at a periodic flea market are different in many ways affect the way that customers and goods circulate as well as the construction of identities inside those places. Through analyses of the supermarket and material market devices – trolleys, aisles, signs, gondolas, desks and shelving – Cochoy has proven the importance of paying attention to seemingly mundane material devices inside market places and exposed the way that local, material devices make consumers do and think things without doing very much at all (Cochoy 2007). Furthermore, according to Latour actor-networks are what “provide actants with their actions, with their subjectivity, with their intentionality, with their morality” (Latour 1999: 18). In a similar fashion Daniel Miller (2002) argues that the sale of a car can be understood by references to the entangled web of its purchaser’s lifestyle, finances, projected use of the car, as well as the salesperson’s commissions, the franchised dealership to the manufacturer, and his or her quota, etc. The resultant action repertoire; calculations, judgments, comparisons etc. on part of the purchaser, is partly the effect of his or her social network and the circulation of preferences that aid in format-

ting a consumer's choice before entering the market space (and while inside the market).

## Previous Research on Flea Markets

From a consumer research perspective on city places, there is an abundance of work with an empirical focus on the department store and in particular shopping malls while market places like flea markets have been less studied (cf. Jackson et al 1998; for exceptions see Sherry 1990; Fredriksson 1996; Crewe & Gregson 1997). Even though consumption theorists like Baudrillard quite early in the history of consumption theory developed his theory of a "system of objects" as a contribution to the understanding of consumption as a fleeting and circulating phenomenon, these objects were immaterial; they were first and foremost signs standing in for the objects that circulated. In previous studies we argue that consumption is not just about brands, marketing, sentiments, experiences, trends, fashions and retail spaces (Hansson & Brembeck 2012; Hansson 2014), and not only supports things moving within the global culture industry (Lash & Lury 2007). The process of moving cargo and goods is often hidden from public view and, importantly, hidden from consumers by what Raymond Williams described as "the magic system of marketing" (Williams 1993; see also Cochoy 2007 on "hidden" processes inside supermarkets). Research on retail spaces as well as studies on alternative geographies of consumption has tended to neglect this system, thus obscuring the fact that products actually need to be moved through space to reach consumers.

While research on marketing and circulation of signs (Lash & Urry 1994; du Gay 2004) abound, less focus is directed to what we elsewhere termed "consumer logistics" as an important feature of circulatory systems (Hansson & Brembeck 2012; Hansson 2014; see also Birtchnell & Urry 2014 for a global approach towards professional and commercial "cargo logistics"). Thus, how market places – as the result of circulation processes – rely on material objects for their everyday functioning, and the fact that mundane objects like streets, shopping carts and urban environments writ large contribute to the circulatory logics of markets and their sign values (i.e. the system of objects made available for (immaterial) consumption) has been less emphasized (cf. McGrath 1993; Cochoy 2008; Hansson & Brembeck 2012; Brembeck, Cochoy & Moisaner 2014; Hansson 2014).

In his study of flea markets, sellers and buyers as well as spatial and material configurations specific to flea markets are discussed by Ottoson in terms of how they made particular forms of exchange relations emerge (2008: 85-85). Market stands, for example, provided particular places inside the markets which afforded particular temporalities as well as body movement among visitors (*ibid.*: 97, 106). Consumer subjectivities like for example Ottoson's (2008) "explorer" is arguably the result of people entering a "state of flow" in terms of search behavior. But

impressions might overwhelm a visitor and affect them, thus causing internal motion while for example paying attention to an object. Or the interaction with goods triggers calculative- and estimate action in terms of moving things into quality categories based on commodity attributes (cf. “sustainable” or “bargain”), and price differentiation while bargaining with a seller. *Cognitive circulation* (of for example “judgment devices”, cf. Karpik 2010) is therefore also a potential feature to be recognized. But, such circulations are dependent on specific conduits or what Karpik calls a ‘practioner network’ that ensures the circulation of credible knowledge about objects, thus actualizing circulation in terms of transmission of goods and information. Buyer and seller could thus be said to engage in forms of interactive consumption- and market circulations (flows of information, communication, estimation, verification) with the purpose of for example price formation (cf. Karpik 2010).

Bitner (1992) states that nowadays, when sales encounters are frequently de-humanised, mechanised, digitalised and formalised, local flea markets hold the potential to generate a servicescape metaphorically similar to a retail theatre: the dialectic between informal-formal, economic-festive is characteristic of flea market cultures (cf. Belk, Sherry & Wallendorf 1988). Previous consumer research studies are, however, mostly interested in how consumers singularize commodities after purchase, and not the circulation of meanings extending from moments when such commodities are being re-introduced into the market space; i.e. the sales interaction when for example goods collected from an attic is back on display in the second hand market and ready for re-sale. Important exceptions are the works of Elizabeth Parsons (2006; 2010) on antiquities and Duffy, Hewer and Wilson (2012) on vintage connoisseurship. Duffy, Hewer and Wilson study the vintage marketplace as an intimate, personalized, lived experience, and hunting for vintage as a social practice. Parsons examines the ways in which market exchanges in the world of antique dealing offer dealers resources for the creation and expression of identity. As such, Parsons presents a view of identity as discursively produced through interaction. Analyses of UK antique dealers show that they typically drew on discourses of taste and aesthetics, and of morality and care, to manage their identities. In doing so they mobilized different constructions of customers, fellow dealers, second hand and antique markets and objects. Importantly, Parsons’ studies reveal that the antiques world as a marketplace institution is a space within which particular sets of meanings and practices circulate constitutive of dealer and visitor agencies.

## Methodology and Data

The research about the flea market Kommersen was conducted during a five-month period in late 2012 in collaboration between the authors and colleagues from Gothenburg City Museum (note). A broad variety of ethnography-inspired

multi-methods were used by the project group. The approach can be said to be typical of qualitatively oriented studies, which aims to collect a rich material for the study of market culture (Cochoy 2007; Sunderland & Denny 2007; Ehn & Löfgren 2012). Fieldwork on site was conducted during the whole project period using field notes covering themes such as exchange and social interaction, customer and vendor movement, material detail and products assortments. Also, pictures were taken of the interior and exterior to provide details of the flea market activities in- and outside of the building. During fieldwork we conducted all in all 106 long and short semi-structured interviews with dealers and visitors to the market. We also interviewed the current and previous owners/managers of the market, the current café manager, real estate owners, and graffiti artists who had decorated the outside of the building. Moreover the members of the project group acted as dealers themselves during a weekend openly announcing the affiliation to the university and City Museum of Gothenburg and informing about the project. In addition to the project group selling gadgets and trying the position as dealers, visitors were invited to report their views about Kommersen using paper and pencil in return for a bun and a cup of coffee. During this event we also made a semi-quantitative survey of demographic data of visitors and vendors that specific day. Two films were produced by The City Museum during the project which provided extra layers of detail and liveliness to the ethnographic data. In sum, the data collection resulted in a rich and multi-faceted material of life inside and around the building and market, focused on the experiential, sociocultural and material dimensions of consumption at the flea market.

### **Infrastructures and Amateur Logistics**

Cities might, from a larger scale perspective, be considered as composed of different forms of circulation; for example rhythms of traffic, commerce, transport, power, information, signs, and people (Allen et al 1999). In dualistic terms the flows connected to commercial places in a city might be framed as “mainstream” and “alternative” in terms of goods (new vs. second hand), retailers or sellers (professional vs. amateur), and means of transportation/logistics (professional logistics systems vs. amateur logistics). In this sense, flea market logistical flows arguably are dependent on access and distance to the market place as planned and made available on part of the city.

Although consumer transport modes at periodic (and outdoor) markets are described by McGrath et al (1993: 299), they focused on consumers’ logistics and their symbolic value among customers, but left out the issue of “amateur logistics” among vendors. However, retailers’ logistical systems for collecting goods for later distribution inside the store space are prominent features of the circulatory logics contributing to enacting market places as spaces for consumer choice. So are the “hidden” processes of attending to inside contexts of department stores and

supermarkets (Cochoy 2007). While for example mainstream supermarkets develop their own systems of long-distance transportation of goods, goods at the Kommersen flea market were mostly transported by local private people, families, semi-professional vendors and the like.



Upon arrival vendors at Kommersen flea market had to transport their goods to their stalls and employed a variety of innovative solutions for this purpose. This woman, arriving by car, collected her goods in private plastic bags and extended her carrying capacity by using a two-wheeled carrier. A common example of an amateur logistics system for selecting and transporting what ends up inside the market. Obviously, there is a remarkable difference from professional commercial logistics systems where products come packaged in neat boxes/cargo and transported in bulk by company trucks and lifts by professional staff (cf. Birtchnell & Urry 2014). Photo: Lasse Lindeberg, GSM

That tram stops were located close to the flea market and that the space surrounding the market building basically was a large parking space enabled a large quantity of people easy access to the market and a convenient distance in terms of carrying and loading stuff to and from the market. This enabled and/or seduced a varied crowd of people to become amateur vendors at Kommersen at a “low” cost. Distance is a major factor for understanding the flow of goods and people to and from the market; not only distance from the market in terms of visitors actually going to the market space, but also distance as a space to conquer in order to

move stuff across from tram station or parking lot into the market (cf. Brembeck & Hansson 2013; Hansson 2014).



A tram passes outside Kommersen. The tram station was placed ca 50 meters from the Kommersen entrance. Photo: Property of authors



Dealers unloading their goods outside Kommersen from the conveniently located car park with a steel cart borrowed from the market. At approximately 20 meters' distance from the entrance this parking lot was precious to the vendors of the flea market and considered cheap for 2 Swedish Crowns per hour. Photo: Lasse Lindeberg, GSM

During our observations at the flea market we noted how common it was among both visitors and vendors to go to the market by public transportation. The owner of the café inside Kommersen, Afsane, a woman in her mid 40s, described to us how she and many of the long-term as well as short-term vendors she regularly

spoke to during opening hours arrived early in the morning by tram with their merchandise. She used to her home-baked merchandise and considered it convenient to use public transportation for this purpose even though she usually had quite a lot to carry. Distance from the tram station was unsurprisingly important for her as carrying goods is costly on the body.

Of course, the location of the market impacts on how people chose to get there. The fact that infrastructures like car parks and public transportation functioned to move people to the flea market points towards the importance of how material things like cars, trams and infrastructure contribute to market cultures and the circulation of goods and people to the market. But not only was it a question of how people made their way to the market; also issues of *who* (age, gender, ethnicity, class) visited Kommersen revealed themselves by looking at flows of transport. The blend of public transportation- and car-mobile dealers and shoppers contributed to a diversified audience of visitors; i.e. by not disabling or excluding people through closing off access by for example relying on car-mobile visitors, multiple access opportunities seemed to favor a diversified crowd (cf. McGrath et al. 1993; Cregson & Crewe 1997). Infrastructures thus played an integrative role in contributing to the particular patterns of second hand dealing and shopping at Kommersen (cf. Straw 2010: 196-200 for a discussion on socio-demographic differences according to second hand site location within cities).



A younger woman loads a cargo-carrier with goods before entering the flea market. Notice how she uses the whole car for transporting stuff to the market; an example of “semi-professional” logistics systems enacted from collaboration with parking space close to the market and a steel cart borrowed from the Kommersen managers. Photo: Lasse Lindeberg, GSM



An elderly woman equipped with a carrier to transport goods from the flea market upon leaving. Access to public transport and walkable pavements afforded elderly people to visit the market without much aid. Photo: *The Magic of a Local Flea Market* by Hilda Holmdahl.



Caption Figure 3c: Families with children, young people and elderly co-habited the market and arrived by different modes of mobility. Down in the right hand corner a biking market visitor locks his bike before entering the market and in the left corner another bike rests while its owner visits the market. Photo: Property of authors

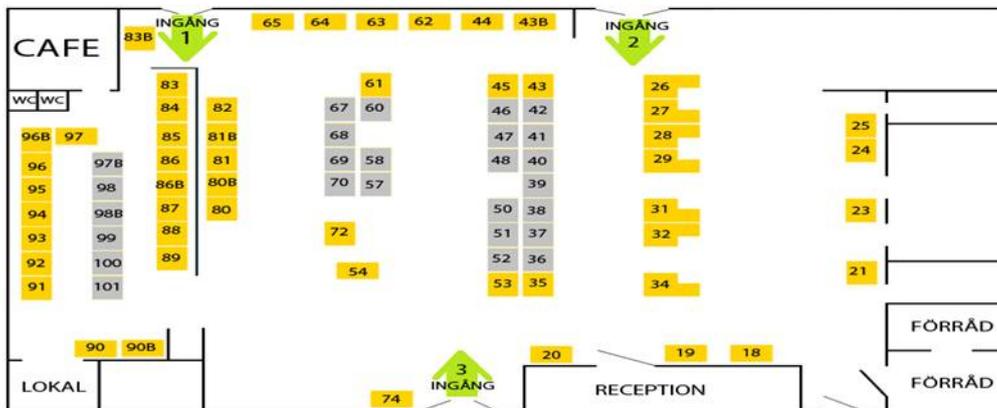
From our observations at the market we could conclude that the presence of infrastructural resources allowed for a wide audience to visit the market: elderly and young people without access to a car; people with scarce economic resources; people from different areas of the city; bikers, walkers, car-users and tram-riders

etc. Our semi-quantitative counts on visitors to Kommersen revealed the presence of an audience with diverse ethnic, geographic, age and class backgrounds moving inside the market, but also multiplicity in terms of mobility. In comparison with previous studies of open air markets, second hand outlets, farmer's markets and other alternative "geographies of consumption" (Crewe & Gregson 1997; Mansvelt 2005; Watson 2009) our results are similar in terms of how the markets represent a diverse space of people. They also reveal the impact that infrastructural resources had on the participation of for example young people and elderly at Kommersen, something that might dovetail with previous results but also strengthens the argument that the city environment, locality, and location of markets affect who travels to it and who chose to visit it (cf. McGrath et al. 1993: 295 for a similar but different argument about the role of parking lots for market interaction but in the context of outdoor periodic markets.)

### **Spatial Lay-out and Display**

One factor that often differentiates flea markets from stores, supermarkets and other forms of retailing is the nature of real estate of such markets. Based on the size, location and form of the flea market they are traditionally not cooped up in the urban space such as stores that are located in the bottom of buildings or along "mainstreets" where space is precious. Flea markets need spacious places in order to provide room for market stalls and a large number of vendors. Although not always placed inside buildings (some are open-air flea markets), flea market places are recognized by their particular arrangement including set-ups of furniture, stalls and other market objects as well as their spatial lay-out, exchange patterns and circulatory logics. Merchants or vendors at flea markets are traditionally placed behind private stalls handling their own merchandise, something that differentiates the flea market space from modern stores, shops, supermarkets and malls (du Gay 2004; Dubuisson-Quellier 2007).

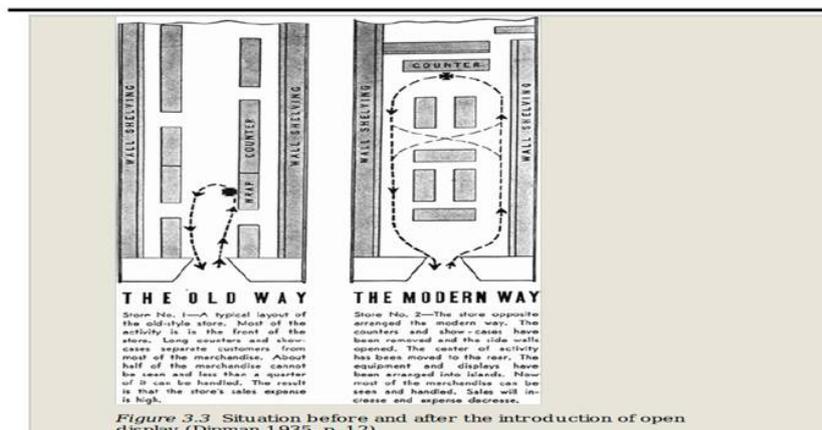
Kommersen was open every weekend, Saturday and Sunday, from 10:00 a.m. to 3:00 p.m. and consisted of a 1,400 square meter space with a little more than 100 stalls plus a small number of permanent installations (a hairdresser, a café, some semi-permanent vendor stalls).



Overview of Kommersen flea market ([www.kommersenloppmarknad.se](http://www.kommersenloppmarknad.se))

In terms of vending, the market was open to private persons, companies, school classes, handicrafts and associations etc. ([www.kommersenloppmarknad.se](http://www.kommersenloppmarknad.se), 13/02/11). The building which housed the market provided a clearly defined rectangular space, in effect a large in-door room with a ceiling with a lot of visible material such as plumbing, pipes and so on. The floor of the building was occupied by a cafe, a toilet and market stalls. During weekends the market stalls anchored the physical space of the market. The market stalls were dedicated to goods like clothing items, antiques, vintage objects, food, and toys. As can be seen in Figure 4, each market stall, represented by a number ranging from 1 – 100, had one vendor.

As customers interact with goods and vendors inside the market a particular form of spatial movement across space is revealed. Different from traditional store or supermarket spatial lay-out, where most of the activity either is in the front of the store (old-school style with merchants behind counters and in control of products) or in the rear end (modern style with counters at the exit of the store and products on public display in “gondolas”); inside the flea market space customer activity is everywhere! (cf. Cochoy 2011a).



Old-school and modern store lay-out presented in Cochoy (2011: 11) (28)

The different customer journeys, or spatial circulation patterns, presented above show characteristics typical of both the eras prior and subsequent to before and after the introduction of “open display” (Cochoy 2011a) and are related to use of equipment for display and sell of goods and actor roles inside the market space. Cochoy (2011a) has written about the relationship between the introduction of open display and self-service, where both techniques introduced direct access to commodities, but staged different arrangements or “agencements” (Caliskan & Callon 2010: 8-9; Cochoy 2011a) considering vendor activity, sales encounter, customer circulation and material elements of the physical market space. Open display, where the goods for sale are not anymore kept hidden in drawers but openly displayed on shelves and counters, afforded customers direct sight of goods – thus enacting/“agencing” (attributing consumers particular action repertoires; i.e. “agency”) consumers with *self-sight* – but confirmed the “circular” or “back-and-forth” activity of the merchant grabbing for products. The introduction of *self-service* arranged for another role and circulatory logic for customers where they themselves moved around the store for products (Cochoy *ibid.* 9-13). Prior to the two arrangements, grocery business consisted of organizing exchange between inhabitants of two territories; the grocers’ and the customers’ territories clearly separated through objects like counters and other display equipment. These territories merged with the introduction of self-service and customers shared the same space as merchants interacting through “gondolas” rather than facing each other over the counter. The interesting aspect considered from the point of view of the organization of flea market business is how two logics are present that differ from these orders: the open display of goods affording “*self-sight*” on behalf of consumers (and the possibility to touch and feel the goods) *and* the ceaseless back and forth movement encouraged by the collection of an order of a large number of counters or market stalls (cf. the discussion of open-air grocery markets in Brembeck, Hansson, Lalanne & Vayre 2015). In contradistinction to the constant moving around of the merchant collecting goods in old-school style kind of grocery business; however, at the flea market it is the customers who perform the circulation and collection, only now without the self-service order because every market stall is its own “counter” as well as display.

### **Market Stalls as Curiosity Devices and Wild Display: Mental, Perceptive and Affective Circulations**

Flea market spaces thrive on consumer dispositions like curiosity, pleasure and surprise (Fredriksson 1996; see also Cochoy 2011b). Market and consumer researcher John F Sherry (1990a, 1990b) has called this phenomenon “ambience”. He discusses the immediacy and semiotic intensity of flea markets as examples of such ambience (Sherry 1990a). From another perspective, ethnologist Cecilia Fredriksson (1996) writes of flea markets’ inherent aesthetic powers in terms of

alluring *and* disgusting potentials, depending on visitors' different dispositions upon encountering the flea markets and the goods for sale there (1996: 22).



A cluttered market stall.

Photo from the film *The Magic of a Local Flea Market* by Hilda Holmdahl.

Arguably, cluttered market stalls can act as *curiosity arousal devices* (Cochoy 2011b) for some customers and were used to create a playful and interesting product environment. The presentation of merchandise at Kommersen seemed to follow the logic of semiotic intensity as described by Sherry (1990a). The chance to be surprised – a consumer disposition drawn on by many vendors – by finding special goods and the explorative part of flea market consumption were well represented in our collection of consumer experiences in this study:

You can find gold here. It is absolutely perfect. You can find the best stuff from October until Christmas. We have bought new designer clothes here. New Eton shirts to my husband for pennies. Even Ikea stuff that is almost new. Our entire home is built by stuff from Kommersen, things as good as new. It is the highlight of the week to go here. Lots of people do not know how fantastic it is. One can find archaeological finds here and all sorts of stuff. [...] We usually write wish lists of things to marvel at. What you'll find here has feeling and is unique. Even Ikea stuff gets a connoisseur feeling (26-year-old woman)

This young woman is an expert. She knows what to buy but also thrives on the expectation to be surprised. In similar ways other customers shared this disposition towards the market:

I look for interesting stuff: books, DVDs, food and technical things. Interesting stuff. It's like a hunt in the woods; anything might end up in front of my gun (male, mid-60s).  
Check out this bargain! A jacket from Sisley for just 20 crowns! Now that's Kommersen! (female, 17 years old).

The impact of market stall presentations as small scale commercial architectures of seduction (cf. Vernet and de Vit 2007) are powerful enough to trigger cognitive arousal and flea market-specific consumer dispositions (exploring, curiosity, surprise), and gives evidence to the mental circulation at the flea market (inside of customers' heads) but also affective arousal related to the thrills of visual perception of cluttered product environments inside customers' bodies in the form of feelings (cf. Ottoson 2008: 88-93 for similar results). Similar actions and responses have been discussed in the field of "visitor studies" and for example research about "visitor attention" during museum exhibitions (see for example Bitgood 1988; 2002).

Flea markets, of course, have their own set of gears (for example tables and other display materials) for marketing and displaying of goods, making them available for customer inspection. Different from contemporary "open display" logics with shelves made, sorted and placed with the purpose of best intention towards a particular customer journey inside a self-service market; display patterns inside the flea market are "wild" (in the sense of "amateur economic" ideas; cf. Callon & Rabeheriosa 2003). At the flea market we observed such "wild" display, with goods and display furniture (shelves, baskets, paths, stalls) placed in ways that seem to circumscribe any professionalised economic discourse or rationale for display of merchandise.



Market stalls, shelves, rack for hangers, and paths were arranged before opening hours. In comparison to supermarkets, stores or other market spaces the flea market has its own organizational logic contributing to the character of movement of customers and goods. The number and variety of goods available for visitor inspection as well as the display equipments used for consumer and vendor support (shelves, stalls, tables, hangers etc.) enact the flea market as different from professionally managed market spaces. The overall "blue print" for the layout and display of goods expresses itself according to a "wild" market form. Photo: Lasse Lindeberg, GSM



Wild display is something altogether different than “open” display. It might even downplay the idea of “self-sight” from a consumer’s or visitor’s perspective as for example discussed by Cochoy in his studies of indoor markets’ display logics. It limits direct access through customer sight as in this image where goods are placed in front of each other, being piled up without transparency and in no obvious order but to use the space and equipment at hand. Photos: Lasse Lindeberg, GSM

### **Inhabitation, Intercorporeal Practices and Sensibilities in Labyrinth Organizational Logics**

Upon observation, the market was a crowded, bustling, confusing urban space, serving a diverse group of urban and suburban customers. This diversity comprised Russians, Eastern Europeans, Scandinavians, Vietnamese, South Asian, Somalis, and East Africans. Besides semiotic values and economic exchange (as examples of circulation of value and money), the flea market was also a physical container of differentiated bodies (aged, young, disabled, strong, weak, tall and short, baby stroller-, bag-, shopping- and luggage trolley equipped) and materials, that contributes to give form to inter-corporeal activities and affects.



When the doors pushed open at 10 o’clock on Saturday mornings the anticipating crowd squeezed inside the market; compressed like a herd or flock of bodies moving into a “market fold” that soon was full of enticed customers moving around the stalls. Photo: Lasse Lindeberg, GSM

Unlike commercial store or retail spaces, which constrain movement to a single bi-directional circuit – from entrance to counter and clerk/merchant/cashier and then towards the exit – the flea market had numerous flows with little predictability of customer movement. A circuit, as we use it here, has little possibilities for change and move in a uniform direction, whereas flows might go off in any direction. One second people were moving along the path set up between the cafe and the market stalls, the next second they were cutting a diagonal trajectory through gaps that would be off-limits in a regular store or shop (getting too close to where the money was kept...). The opposition between circuit (linear) and flows (non-linear) is useful as an illustration. If we consider professionalized market circuits being more bi-directional and quite easy to start and stop, block and redirect (through the work of store staff and market things like aisles and shelves); working through a predetermined channel when certain conditions are met; flows at the flea market, on the contrary, tended to push through blockages or find creative ways around them by creating new spaces, dependent upon the placement of conductive material. That different areas of flea markets tend to differentiate according to its temporal intensity is confirmed by Ottoson's study of three flea markets (2008: 106) where the non-linearity of consumer trajectories is also highlighted as a particular feature of the spatial configuration of flea markets.



The volatility of crowd behavior also contributed to the atmosphere of the Kommersen market. The soundscape, too, qualified its character; a buzzing and at times soaring but fleeting noise level from vendors dealing and shouting, but also gentle talking among people socializing and customers' continuous voicing of questions about prices. Photo: Daniel Gillberg

During opening hours the flows kept changing. Restricted by the physical presence of the market stalls, the customer flows retained their adaptive quality similar to inside a supermarket among shelves and aisles. The space retained a feeling of dynamism, a sense that strange encounters could and would happen. In this sense Kommersen flea market was a remarkably dynamic space. During field

work we arrived early enough to witness the market set-up. Stalls were erected every weekend, products laid out, and the weekend's business began. The stalls provided some physical constraints, as people squeezed themselves between stalls or blocked the major paths by trying on clothes or stopped to talk to one another or vendors. Thus, the market space was a fold of circulating bodies, things, movements and clustering that are necessary to grasp to understand its character.



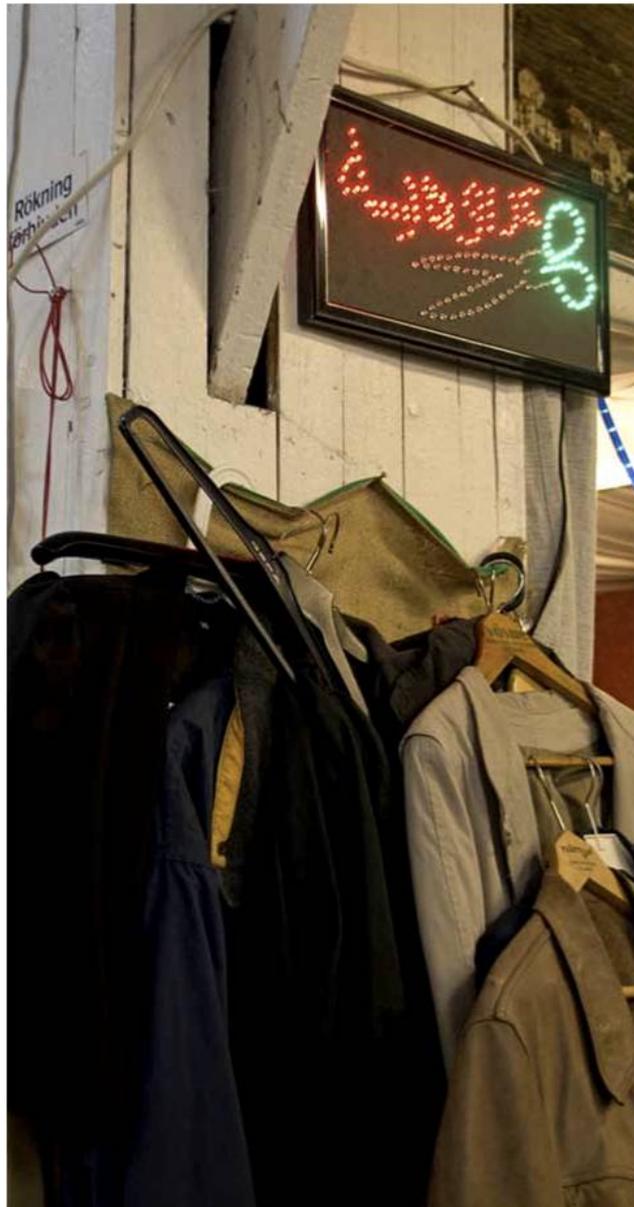
Moving around the market space between stalls, goods and fellow visitors while pushing a baby stroller engaged severe attention from its pusher. Here a woman is trying to zigzag her way through the crowd of customers obviously engaged in looking at the stalls with products rather than avoiding bumping into a stroller. Photo: Lasse Lindeberg, GSM

Bodies presented themselves differently at the flea market. Few shoppers charged through the market intent on getting through in minimum time; the experience tended to be more exploratory. Children were also brought to Kommersen as part of a shopping experience. Strollers pushed around by men and women tended to have bags slung over the handles or were otherwise used for transporting stuff.

Body circulations also produced *a sensual space* where connections among particular goods are more deeply valorized. Flea markets are spaces of intimacy. Considering intimacy between the human and “more than human” brings the materiality of both into focus. From a similar corporeal context, Sarah Whatmore writes:

the rhythms and motions of [...] intercorporeal practices [growing, provisioning, shopping, cooking and eating] configure spaces of connectivity between more-than-human life worlds; topologies of intimacy and affectivity that confound conventional cartographies of distance and proximity, and local and global scales. (Whatmore 2002: 162)

This kind of circulatory-based arousal and intensification of affective encounters engaged not only cognitive action but also perceptive and embodied engagement as part of the enactment of the Kommersen flea market. Sensory exchange as a mode of circulation constituted much of the sense of place. Different bodies brushed against one another, the smell of old stuff being pulled from attics and storage rooms blended with home-baked dishes and coffee, exclamations of curiosity and bodies leaning with heavy bags. Bodies responded differently to the properties of the flea market — its smell, colors, ruggedness, temperature, and content.



The smell and feel of old stuff is different from new ones. Photo: Daniel Gillberg

The intimacy present at Kommersen was one of contact, for example connecting people's lives outside the market to this market moment through small talk, questions asked about merchandise, sharing a smile, seeing the same vendor, the smell of and touching products. Pleasure was part of the sensuousness of bodies. People walked the aisles meeting the eyes of people passing by. They smiled, they looked interested or their faces were blank because they were guided forward, circulating without effort, by the swell of the crowd.



Vendor sharing a smile.

Photo: *The Magic of a Local Flea Market* by Hilda Holmdahl.

Pleasure, in this context, was not in particular an individual experience; it emerged among bodies and things in place. Rubbing shoulders with strangers was a common feature in this crowded market and worked as a source of public intimacy out of circulating bodies (cf. Ottoson 2008: 103-107)



Rubbing shoulders with strangers between the market stalls were evidently part of the flea market experience and several visitors described to us how they enjoyed the chance encounters with strangers while attending the crowded market. "Nowhere but at Kommersen", as one elderly man accounted for his experience of moving around and bumping into and talking to people at the flea market. Photo: Lasse Lindeberg, GSM

Arguably, the flea market space actualized the labyrinth as an organizational element of space. It was realized among customers and visitors as a game of discovery (being thrifty and looking for bargains; hunting for precious vintage; bumping into strangers by chance; rubbing shoulders while shopping) and as a mechanism that attracted the customers in order to first read the space and then experience it. The labyrinth arrangement enacted a market space of chance and flow rather than prediction, planning and circulation; a quality that emerged from unintended chance encounters as well as the sheer number and variety of things assembled inside Kommersen.

### **Circulating Goods for Fun or out of Necessity: Entrepreneurs and the Shamed Poor**

It has been argued that vendors and visitors at flea markets are part of networks with different relations to the objects on offer in terms of for example aesthetics, care, apprenticeship and vintage connoisseurship (Parsons 2010; Duffy, Hewer & Wilson 2012). It was obvious that inside Kommersen the vendors and visitors were part of different networks ensuring the circulation of objects of different kinds and that their motives to engage in the circulation, what we, following Latour (1999), call the logics of circulation, were different. Sometimes these networks were homogenous, covering both vendors and buyers, and the stalls acted as nodes for likeminded, with the objects retaining the same position after purchase. Sometimes, and perhaps more frequently, buyers and sellers belonged to different networks, and the status of the objects for sale was transformed as they changed hands. With respect to the vendors, the networks and the logics of circulation differed for the more or less permanent vendors renting their table for the whole season and the temporary vendors who spent only a weekend, or maybe only one day, at Kommersen. These made up about half of all the vendors. Among the permanent vendors there was an emphasis on the commercial aspects, profit, mostly as a way to manage a precarious economic situation and eke out a living, but also with the dream of their own little shop if only they had the money and opportunity: a combination of dreams of becoming a professional retailer and an economy of scarcity. This agrees with studies of motives to engage in second-hand shopping that generally reveal that those are seldom clear-cut; they can occur out of necessity or out of choice, sustainability might be one motive but not necessarily so (e.g. Bardhi & Arnould 2003; Guiot & Roux 2010). One example of a scarcity motive came from an elderly lady who had been a shop owner in her homeland Venezuela and who had for the last several years rented a relatively large stall in a corner of the building, primarily to supplement a meager pension. Like several others of the permanent sellers she lamented the fact that it was difficult to get the business to go around and that the temporary vendors were dumping prices. Typical for the permanent vendors was a very slow circulation of

goods. The same objects seemed to appear at their tables week after week, making their stalls less attractive for bargain-hunting visitors who were recurrent guests. A close-up reveals two circulation logics in her story: a logic of entrepreneurship and a logic of scarcity.

Generally, there was, however, a noticeable/significant difference between dealers who sold items in order to get money for food and other life necessities, and the cheerful entrepreneurs who sold stuff for a profit, but also as a nice leisure time activity and for social benefits in terms of a friendly atmosphere and the enjoyment of a chat or laugh with fellow dealers. Some typical comments from this latter group were the following:

It's an exciting experience and a good but small income opportunity (a girl in her 20s, first-time seller).

I make some money, but I do it mostly for fun. It is exciting and fun to chat with the visitors, and I enjoy selling at Kommersen with my friend (a woman in her mid-30s, first-time seller).

Typical examples of entrepreneurs were those vendors selling off bankruptcy stock. There was for example a couple touring markets with this kind of goods. At their weekend at Kommersen they had brought a stock of wool caps. Customers flocked around their table, and profit was good. Another example was a young woman selling gadgets from her mother's bankrupt jewelry business. Other types of entrepreneurial circulation was provided by two girls in their late teens who were selling personal care and make-up products on commission for a company, two sisters who sold homemade garlands to hang on the front door for Christmas as a way to earn some extra money, and the school class selling homemade buns to earn money for a school trip. They all belonged to different networks of semi-professional circulation for a profit, and appreciated their role as sellers at Kommersen.

Several of the returning vendors did not, however, sell things at the flea market for fun, but out of necessity and the need for money for living. For this category of dealers, the social connections with other dealers offered social support; the flea market was a space where the poor and excluded could make some money. Three groups of people for whom Kommersen seemed reasonably significant in this respect were the elderly, people outside labour markets and ethnic minorities. Among them there was obviously a circulation logic of scarcity both on the side of buyers and on the vendors, giving rise to quite different subject positions than the cheerful entrepreneur. Selling stuff out of necessity was sometimes considered shameful and something to be hidden. For example, a female dealer, a woman in her 50s, told us that she did not want anyone she knew, or her former colleagues, to know that she disposed of belongings at Kommersen. "It's embarrassing to have to sell things at Kommersen". She had been doing this for several years now. It was a way to supplement her income and to maintain a social life. "It can generate money for a bag of groceries", she said. She had been employed by the hour

at a hospital and was an educated nurse, but it had been difficult for her to find a permanent job. Likewise, for some of the visitors, buying stuff at Kommersen was a way to make ends meet: “Kommersen suits my wallet”, “We cannot afford to shop elsewhere”. Especially for single mothers, Kommersen was the place to buy cheap things for their children.

Kommersen was obviously a place with a “low socioeconomic threshold” and a place where almost anyone, could start selling things without strong financial resources. There was no overseer or control mechanism that would interfere with business or ask difficult questions about legal or economic viability as in regular commercial settings.

### **Circulating Overflow and a Changed set of Sustainable Consumption Discourses**

By far the most common type of circulation among the temporary vendors, however, was recycling: the selling of leftover stuff from home, residual of wind clearances and removals. If the reason in many cases for the permanent dealers was economic scarcity, for temporary, often middle-class vendors, it was more or less a case of “dumping”; Kommersen was seen a sensible place to dump excess stuff and possibly earn some money in the process. So the problem for this group was rather one of overflow than one of scarcity, which perhaps was one of the reasons why the two groups sometimes looked suspiciously at each other (or rather the permanent dealers were not entirely satisfied with the way the temporary dealers were “selling stuff for one Swedish Crown”).

How strong the economic motive was varied within this group. Some had cleared the closet specifically to get some Christmas money. But for most of them, it seemed to be a case of thinking that “recycling is good”; a pleasant way to do well, plus that one could earn some money and “that’s never wrong”. There was also a group of female friends who shared an apartment and simply sold excess clothing to make room for new stuff (and money to buy them), and two sisters who told us that they nurtured the principle “one in one out”. For them, circulating stuff was simply a necessity in order to be able to acquire more, a finding that agrees with previous studies advocating that for example car-boot sales (Gregson & Rose 2000) and second-hand shopping (Brembeck 2013) may simply be a way for consumers to be able to buy more; to keep the flow going. Several visitors, however, stressed issues of sustainability: “Recycling is good,” “This is good consumer mindset.” “Half of my life and my whole wardrobe are from Kommersen” were some of the comments, revealing how circulating discourses and practices (shopping, recycling) afforded particular consumer dispositions to stabilize around the practices of flea market consumption. The idea of secondhand shopping as something ugly, shameful and almost indecent from the 1950s and 60s (cf. Fredriksson 1996), was for this category of vendors gone, and instead the

visitors appreciated the uniqueness and the social and environmental values of secondhand shopping.

It's environmentally conscious shopping; it's an effective way to reduce one's shopping cravings. If we get tired of our old stuff we just sell it here again after a couple of months. It's a good way to think about consumption (a couple in their 50s).

In sum, looking at the activities at Kommersen from a circulatory approach allowed us to analyze how different circulatory logics afforded vendor and consumer subjectivities like "the recycler" and "the sustainable consumer" to be performed at the flea market through a continuous flow of recycled goods and discourse around what (goods and practices) and who is sustainable.

Obviously, these people drew on discourses of sustainability to legitimate their consumer practices at Kommersen.

### **Circulating Curiosities: Networks of Connoisseurs and Collectors**

As argued by Parsons (2006) dealers frequently mobilize discourses of taste and aesthetics in developing their identities as both experts and discerning businessmen and women, especially in regard to antiques, and, referring to Duffy, Hewer and Wilson (2012) to vintage. Flea markets are places where one learns a shared aesthetics, a similar world view, style preferences and appreciation, especially of objects that have been upgraded to collectibles, vintage or even antiques. It was obvious that Kommersen provided a space for this kind of apprenticeship both among dealers and customers. Expressions of secondhand connoisseurship, expert knowledge and a flare for the used and re-used – things with patina, history and usage – were frequently expressed among the visitors (see Ottoson 2008 for more examples).

I know a thing or two about stuff. My home is full of it. I just saw a Boda Nova over there for 10 crowns but I'm not allowed buying it for my wife. We already have three of them at home. I tend to look at this as part of my retirement savings (elderly man).

Looking for vintage was especially emphasized by some visitors, like the woman who said that she had "a nose for vintage" and bargained "cool stuff" for herself and her children. There were even examples of visitors who redesigned clothes and textiles bought at Kommersen and sold them at other markets. Sometimes environmentally aware middle class consumers, thinking that recycling is good and second-hand and vintage is cool, simply exchanged objects with each other's. Other times tattered and worn objects were recruited or "enrolled" (Callon 1986) to networks of coolness and vintage, and thus acquired quite a new status. Collectors, hobbyists and antique dealers generally are recurrent visitors at flea markets, and this was the case also at Kommersen. This can be regarded as an example of circulation of goods in networks of like-minded, and also of the effects of nostalgia and the attraction of things with a history. Examples are the man who was

looking for parts from old radios and the lady who collected teacups. Feelings of nostalgia “switching between the general and the personal” (Ottoson 2008) were especially common among collectors with an interest in stuff with an air of old Gothenburg and heritage value. “It is fantastic with this last remnant of the old harbor sheds”, a man exclaimed whose hobby it was to build Art Deco lamps of parts from old lamps, telling us about his childhood walks with his father in the quarters where Kommersen is now situated.

Among the vendors, Conny, an elderly man, occupied a unique position. On his neat table in the middle of the building there was a lot of stuff: antique zippo lighters, hand crafted wooden piggy banks, old brochures on technical innovation and craft, paper clips from England, small figurines related to life at sea, and so on. Conny told us that he sold some expensive things and antiques that could not be found anywhere else, “not even on the internet”. His sale at Kommersen had given him an international network of collectors from Norway, Estonia and Russia. His permanent location on Kommersen was the prerequisite. This was where collectors could find him and he collected artifacts and information on curiosities from his friends in the network that ended up on his stall. Conny’s business is an example of circulation of things with various origins on an international scale



Conny behind his market stall at Kommersen.  
Photo: Lasse Lindeberg, GSM

connected to antiques and collecting, that was “summed up” at his stall, acting as a node in a network bridging time and space. Conny was not only moving his things to Kommersen but was also moved by their histories and his wider network of memorabilia associates to perform his particular mode of local vendorhood at Kommersen as the only “real collector” and a fancy one at that.

Activities at Conny’s stall can be regarded as a form of ‘collective witnessing’ (Jarvenpa 2003) that involves shared knowledge about circulating valuables, validation of their connection to known places and social construction of their value by knowledgeable specialists or *cognoscenti* (ibid: 575). This is also an example of how the agency of vendors is wedded to the structure of the flea

market and second-hand culture writ large, “providing actors with their actions, with their subjectivity, with their intentionality, with their morality (Latour 1999: 18).

Turning back to ANT circulation appears as a fundamental process – things, as well as networks, must circulate to exist. “Local” agency such as the one at *Kommersen* can only emerge through circulation of social and material things that seem local but in fact are spread out in time and space. Subjectivities as visitors and vendors are made possible through specific networks of circulation. One example is Conny where “the circulation of time (in the sense of old, vintage, memories of other eras, etc..)” enabled the localized entity/agent characteristic of Conny and rendered the vintage-, antiques- and collectors aura to the Zippo lighters, figurines and paper clips at his table. According to Latour (1999), actor-networks are the formations of relations between elements circulating and stabilizing at particular points that provide agents with their actions. Consumer action and behavior is the outcome of such circulations; i.e. there were no ex-ante consumers or vendors without the necessary assembling of a network of flows (of goods, meanings, practices, knowledge, preferences) that shaped their formatting of becoming full-fledged (and well equipped) participators in the flea market (cf. Miller 2002). This means that in order to understand consumer- and vendor subjectivities at *Kommersen*, we analyzed them as outcomes of particular circulations and “equipped” with intentionality or motives, and moralities and practices. For example, by certain goods and practices being viewed as imbued with values and meaning of sustainability, the sustainable consumer emerged from interacting with things circulating at the flea market. This also agrees with Parson’s claim (2006) that market place institutions, such as antique dealing, are spaces where particular sets of discourses circulate constituting dealer identities, as well as with a number of studies of the emergence of consumer subjectivities at flea markets (e.g. Sherry 1990a; McGrath 1993; Ottoson 2008). Also, such circulation is endowed with specific power asymmetries, like for example the flows of goods at the market emerging from necessity (i.e. shortage of money/cash flow) and the ones that are the result of other forms of supply operations, like for example forms of handling overflow among semi-professional vendors.

## Conclusion

The purpose of this article is to disclose the many different forms of circulation that are at work at a local flea market. Through ethnographic observation, interviews, document analysis and video- and photo observation at *Kommersen*, we argue that a circulatory approach towards flea market consumption is not about dictating a single cycle, rhythm or flow that over-determines the logics and meanings of flea markets. It is also not only about the symbolic and subjective dimensions of markets. Rather, to perform a circulatory analysis of flea markets means

to engage in disclosing the relationship between various forms of circulation and their logics that serve to ground an analysis of flea market hydraulics. Therefore, we highlighted not only meaning dimensions in terms of what and why people were at Kommersen, or the forms of exchange flows that characterized seller-buyer interaction. We also contributed with an analysis of bodily, affective and material flows. Paying attention to those disclose the myriads of embodied and inter-objective processes of circulation that contributed to flea market consumption configuration; inter-corporeal flows affected consumer movement and consumer subjectivities; affective intensities contributed to the atmosphere and interactive context of the market; stalls, goods, visitors and sellers were all engaged in a sensory, perceptive and affective participation that was analyzed as part of Kommersen's circulatory logics. Due to its "wild" marketing logics, the flea market analysis revealed important distinctions between alternative market spaces and professional markets. Wild display and the cluttered and specific assortment of goods contributed to give shape to circulations that differentiate consumer choice and calculative action as well as seller behavior and exchange interaction from regular apartment stores. Also, seller networks, flows of expertise and consumption discourses about for example coolness or thrift were circulating differently at the flea market due to its informal and alternative nature, sometimes homogeneous and sometimes not, giving the objects for sale a shifting status.

Obviously we have not been able to trace every flow in any direction that contributes to the existence and meanings of Kommersen. And we have actively analyzed a specific period in time; maybe there are important seasonal changes in terms of social, economic and thing circulations that we could not detect due to temporal limits? A hydraulic system might very well have many exits and engage in overflows not necessarily within the range of researchers' limited means of observation. To detect circulations is also a time consuming effort. Where did goods go after their purchase? Were they re-introduced into other market contexts? Did their circulation end or start again at the end of the exchange? Did flows of people in and out of this particular flea market connect into a circulation in terms of shopping routes where second hand connoisseurs went from vintage shop to vintage shop? Were there socio-demographic flows connected to the city we did not detect because of inadequate research tools? The circulatory approach proposed here provides answers to some questions but raises others.

In regular supermarkets or grocery stores consumers are guided, and thus choice and circulation are aided, or "edited", by well-known "choice devices"; furniture such as aisles, signs, prices, products and shelves are arranged according to professional management and organizational logics thus "equipping" or "agencing" particular forms of market action and behavior among consumers and merchants (Cochoy 2011a). The peculiarity that in many economic and management theories, objects and tools for "choice editing" are sometimes missing from or very different in alternative market space contexts like the local flea market

that we have analyzed in this article make the material assets that we have found particularly interesting. Therefore, in this article, we addressed the circulation logic or the “hydraulics” at the flea market, and the many ways that market things (stalls, objects, bodies, building, and furniture) contribute to this circulation, or “hydraulics” that turned out to be dynamic and non-deterministic rather than mechanistically linear and calculable. In this article we show the way that logics of circulation constitute particular and localized second hand markets and we argue that an approach towards second hand markets based on ontologies of flows and circulation grounded in actor-network and non-representational (including non human materials and embodied senses and affects) theories contribute to an albeit different view of such markets. Not only does such an approach enable analysis of commonly studied features like calculative action and social interaction at flea markets, but also some rarer issues like cognitive patterns of consumer curiosity, emotions, senses and affect as outcomes of circulatory dynamism.

The ANT approach to flea market consumption research revealed the strength of this theory in that the material performance of things and bodies disclosed through close observation of consumer and seller practices and various market devices cannot be adequately theorized by perspectives that primarily rely on peoples’ talk and discourse about their consumption (see Arnould & Thompson 2005). Harrison (2000) argues that “embodiment” incorporates the significance of all the senses in the bodily practices of mobility and enactment of spaces. This, we argue, form an important part of subjectivities enacting flea market space while handling goods and people. The attention paid to the interaction between visitor bodies and market-things (space, displays, etc.) is a contribution to studies often focused on cognitive action (calculating) or semiotic interpretations. Differently-circulating consumers disclosed affective dispositions and sensibilities towards the way they moved among goods and things inside the market.

Even though flea markets arguably are places of commerce and exchange of second hand goods, there is a large variety of other forms of flows or circulations going on “backstage” that afford the surface phenomena of second hand consumption to come into being. Many of these circulations, we argue, are material rather than immaterial and form the “technological unconsciousness” of such market places. We have addressed these circulatory aspects and discussed how irregular issues such as flows of infrastructure, means of transport, food, energy, temperature, smells, affects, clutter, cognitions, display equipments, and human bodies matter. We have also introduced more common topics of circulation related to second hand spaces and flea markets; those of interactions between sellers and buyers, circulation of goods, and flows of money (or prices), but we have done so with the help of actor-network theory in terms of networks and logics of circulation. From this perspective the activities at Kommersen included many different types of circulation and stuff of different kinds and origins dependent on the mix of people of different ages, genders and sociocultural and ethnic backgrounds.

**Niklas Hansson** holds a PhD in Ethnology and is a researcher at Center for Consumer Science, University of Gothenburg, Sweden. His research interests include consumer culture, digitalization, market devices, and second hand- and fair trade markets. His latest publication is Brembeck, Hansson, Lalanne & Vayre (2015) *Life Phase, Mobility and Consumption*. London: Ashgate. E-mail: [niklas.hansson@cfk.gu.se](mailto:niklas.hansson@cfk.gu.se)

**Helene Brembeck** is Professor in Ethnology and Co-director of Center for Consumer Science at University of Gothenburg, Sweden. Her research interests include consumer culture, parenthood, childhood, the circulation of children's stuff and secondhand markets. Her latest publication is Brembeck, Hansson, Lalanne & Vayre (2015) *Life Phase, Mobility and Consumption*. London: Ashgate. E-mail: [helene.brembeck@cfk.gu.se](mailto:helene.brembeck@cfk.gu.se)

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