

Yard Sales: A Book and an Exhibition: From Selling Off Objects to Redeeming Memory

By Octave Debary

Abstract

The fate of everyday objects, when they reach the end of their lives – worn out, and sometimes even broken – varies a great deal. In some cases, their remains are exhibited in museums as instances of our heritage; in others, they end up in garages and attics, or are simply disposed of. This paper focuses on the social operations surrounding the redefinition of their status as second-hand objects. We pay special attention to what happens when they are requalified as objects of memory in yard sales. Over the past thirty years, such markets – where personal stories change hands – have become favoured destinations for Sunday outings in France. They are open-air museums, where new memories are cobbled together from old objects. We attempt to show what is at stake in these transactions and transitions through a presentation of a book and an exhibition (2011-2012) devoted to French yard sales.

Keywords: Yard sales (*vide-greniers*), objects, memory, exhibition, second-hand, France

Introduction

The purpose of this text is to cross-reference the thoughts on second-hand culture I have developed over the years, against the findings from my latest work on the subject. This research gave rise to a book – a collaboration with photographer Philippe Gabel that also included a contribution from sociologist Howard S. Becker – as well as an exhibition.¹ The present article will draw on both projects (the book and the exhibition) in order to explore how working at the intersection between anthropology and art has enabled me to develop a particular approach to the relation between used objects and memory. The purpose therefore is not so much to present yard sales as fields for ethnographic study as to show how these spaces led in this instance to encounters with bargain-hunters and other visitors to the site, whom we invited to participate in our photographic and narrative work.

I studied what people in France call “vide-greniers” (literally “attic clearances”), a phenomenon that is very similar to American yard sales or British car-boot sales. My general project, which the present text fits into, aims to develop an anthropological approach to memory, based on the circulation of objects in thrift stores, museums, and even the art world. Of particular interest to me are those objects which bear the scars of their past. Ethnographically, my research on yard sales involved participant observations and interviews in fifteen villages in France (essentially in the central and northern regions). I focus on the circulation of these relics – their recycling – in an attempt to understand the kind of future that is open to objects that have reached the end of their intended lifespan. An object reaches the end of its shelf life when it is deemed obsolete, when its initial use value has come to an end. The fate of such objects is varied. In some cases, they become part of our official heritage, ending up as museum exhibits. Some are stored away in attics and garages, when they are not simply disposed of. All these practices question the power of objects; the power they display and the questions they ask us – what are we going to do with them, and how? – when their use value has almost been entirely used up. It is at the moment of disposal that the power of objects, and used objects in particular, becomes particularly clear: on the one hand there is a definite will to remove the object, and yet on the other, we do not really want to throw it out or destroy it. “Something” remains in it, something continues “to matter”, and this explains why we cannot simply move on from the object without some sort of process of transfer (Hetherington 2004). The moment when one parts with an object gives rise to various forms of reinvestment and requalification which all imply that it continues to be endowed with a certain value, that one still recognises its potentiality to continue to exist.

My work situates itself within the broader context of interest in objects as “social actors”. In recent years there has been a strong trend to “repopulate” the social sciences with collectives that are not composed only of (human) subjects. According to this trend, objects have too often been relegated to the background

as mere accessories in the social scenery we perceive. The development of anthropological study of the sciences and technology, led in particular by Bruno Latour in France, has opened up the importance of considering human subjects and non-human objects in symmetrical relation. Beyond the different cultural and historical forms that each category takes, both subjects and objects are actors in social situations. It is therefore essential to consider how objects effect action, and how they exert their power to affect the world (Stewart 2007). This approach prompts us to go beyond a conception that forces us to choose between the power of human beings and that of objects, between antifetishism (social interpretations) and fetishism (object-based interpretations). This dualism – according to which “the cause is either in the object, or in the human beings who project it onto the object” (Hennion & Latour 1993: 9) leads to aporia. Instead the aim must be to understand how every action and every social situation involves objects. In this respect, and if we follow the work of Daniel Miller, the notion of “objectivation” points as much to the materialisation of social processes as does that of subjectivation. As Miller reminds us, up until the middle of the 1970s, the study of material culture, accused of “fetishism” (Miller 1998: 5), was devalued by mainstream social science. This was the age of suspicion of the object, relayed in France through a Marxist critique of fetishism and extended by Jean Baudrillard. The object was reduced to its status as commodity and presumed to be responsible for the diminishing of human possibility, as if all objects were the place of usurpation or destruction of social relations (Baudrillard 1968). However, this tendency is no longer dominant and my own work, particularly in its approach to the object as *reste*, or remainder, intends to be part of the increasing realisation that there is more to objects than was previously acknowledged. In this respect, the perspectives opened up by Alfred Gell have been important for me. Gell’s essay on art (1998) highlights not only the power of objects, but also the inscrutability of the source of this power. By reflecting on art’s agency – its power to fascinate, to grab our attention, and prompt us to action – Gell gives equal treatment to people and objects. In so doing, he reverses Durkheimian object-orientation (“*chosisme*”) – artworks, images, and icons should be treated as people, even though we are often dealing with non-utilitarian objects:

The immediate “other” in a social relationship does not have to be another “human being”. [...] Social agency can be exercised relative to “things” and social agency can be exercised by “things” (and also animals). The concept of social agency has to be formulated in this very permissive manner for empirical as well as theoretical reasons. It just happens to be patently the case that persons form what are evidently social relations with “thing” (1998: 17-18).²

The key research question for the project that this text is based on was: What is the fate of objects that people decide have reached the end of their productive lives? Parting company with an object is a biographical moment which endows it with a new and future value. As Igor Kopytoff put it, “How does the thing’s use

change with its age, and what happens to it when it reaches the end of its usefulness?" (1986: 67). The notion of "objects' biographical trajectory" aims to express the link between humans and the non-humans with whom they share their lives. Following the lives or careers of objects implies to understand how objects are social agents like any other. This social investment – this moral delegation – endows objects with history, especially in the case of everyday objects: those that accompany our existence. This investment is at the root of a process that gives objects a history, a life. When they are about to disappear – on the very threshold of their passing away – it is this history that seems to resist finitude and announce the expectation of a return.

Yard Sales

People do not part with their objects any old how at yard sales, and it is precisely the way in which these partings take place that interests me. My research deals with the social operations surrounding these moments of separation and reappropriation, which, in some cases, appear to be fuelled by a desire to offer a future to objects with a past – to make them "second-hand" objects. This raises the question of the requalification of their initial use value: what, and through this, what meaning, is created or expected by the person parting with them?

Over the last thirty years, French yard sales have become places where people go on Sundays in order to swap objects and stories. Having relegated to the attic all sorts of things that once shared our lives, there comes a day when people resolve to clear out this limbo space that with time, has become all cluttered up. Although stored away, these objects are not deemed totally worthless. Often, people cannot bring themselves to throw them away, to dispose of them just any old how. They would much rather accompany them out of our home and onto the pavement, where they await a new owner. Throughout the year members of the general public gather to sell off their unwanted clutter in their local area or village. French law authorises individuals and local not-for-profit groups to hold occasional sales in this manner up to three times a year. On one of the village or neighbourhood squares, sometimes outside their own homes, people line up dozens or hundreds of objects on the pavement or on makeshift tables. Passers-by – potential new owners – file by, assessing these objects' vestigial utility.

This is a means of mourning, of passing on, in one's own lifetime, objects that have accompanied one's existence. Historically, the appearance of yard sales in rural Europe was usually linked to the disappearance of the last family member in a household. Whatever remained, once the deceased's belongings had been shared out among relatives, could not be destroyed. Throwing away these unwanted objects was strictly taboo, since they were considered as an extension of the dead person's body. Trying to second-guess the meaning and value they had had for their late owner would also have been deemed an insult to his/her memory³. Such

sales represented a specific stage in the mourning process. In French villages, the objects would be displayed outside the deceased's home and sold to the villagers, who were the sole judges of their worth. The same sort of practice continued in France, for example in the Yonne (Burgundy) where public auctions were held after someone's death up until the 1970s. A local solicitor would organize the public sale of a person's entire possessions or simply what his or her inheritors did not wish to keep. The sale generally took place in the yard of the person's home or in the main square⁴.

In literary circles, there has been a recent revival of interest in the links between objects and mourning. French author François Bon, for instance, has written an autobiography through remembrances of objects past (2012). For him, remembering means attempting to uncover the history they bear and which links us to them. Objects have a historical and memorial value. The passage of time is inscribed in them, which is why passing on objects can be such an important aspect of mourning. In this way grieving can be seen to happen in part through the recognition of the value of a particular object in the very act of giving it up, as in a form of rite of passage, or separation. The Belgian novelist and psychoanalyst Lydia Flem describes this moment of mourning, of separation, in *The Final Reminder: How I Emptied My Parents' House* (2004). The fate of the deceased's belongings is bound up with the experience of human mourning. How do you say farewell to such objects? "To keep, give away, sell off or throw away. Each time my gaze or hand considered something, a choice had to be made", "every single object spoke of their absence, revived the feelings of loss, solitude" (2004: 42-43 and 45). The difficulty to part with these objects is a testament to their power to record and preserve the stories of their former owners. We grieve for the departed through their relics: "No doubt were there ways of bidding adieu to the deceased's objects just as there were ways of bidding adieu to the deceased themselves" (ibid.: 118). Letting go of such objects also means letting go of the stories they conjure up. "Emptying". This "harrowing and liberating" process is "the work of emptiness". It is the work of mourning.⁵

As this background account indicates, yard sales have never been primarily about making money: their function is to assist us in passing on those objects we wish to part with. It is in this respect that yard sales are distinct from jumble sales or antiques fairs. Unlike within the professional retail trade, the aim in yard sales is primarily to get rid of things, not to make money out of them. Similar to yard sales in the USA; it is customary not to set prices: people are left free to set them themselves, thereby opening up a space of negotiation requiring a verbal exchange: "In contrast to formal economic systems of fixed prices and passive consumption, shoppers can alter prices in a more personalized form of trade" (Herrmann 2004: 55). The final price is to be understood as an agreement on the transmission of the object, "the price is mutually created" (ibid.: 75). Typically, this means that the object is sold at a very low price to someone who appreciates

it. This appreciation is expressed through the way the object is talked about and handled. More generally, the setting of low prices is meant to introduce another, non-financial exchange value. This trend can be associated with the desire to give away what could be sold. Objects are sometimes given away as “gifts”, or sold at “mates’ rates” or “slashed prices”. In these instances, a verbal exchange frequently replaces the usual financial exchange. Gretchen Herrmann explains that “sellers can often price things in terms of the perceived needs of the shoppers and notions of a fair price (i.e. not what stores charge)” (2006: 132). Contrary to traditional commercial transactions, “sellers pass on something of themselves along with the things they sell, sometimes even personal stories and feelings about the items” (ibid.: 135).

Yard sales are highly theatrical affairs – people consciously *play* at being buyers and sellers – where the rule of exchange is based on a symmetry between the state of the goods on sale and the manner in which they are sold. We are dealing here with an alternative way of consuming objects that have already been consumed: “junk” sold by “junk dealers”. These objects bear the marks of decay, but they also harbour the possibility of a future. It is this very alterity – this transformation – which the expression “second-hand” refers to. When the objects change hands, a second acquisition takes place, as well as the possibility of a redefinition of their initial value. They retain a certain value in relation to both what they no longer are (first-hand) and what they could become (second-hand). “Second-hand”, the desire to keep in order to exchange despite the uncertainty of financial value (does it still work, and for how long?) raises the possibility of an alternative reference value. Mary and James Maxwell have thus put forward the idea that second-hand markets are places where the authority of history replaces commercial value, because “Second-hand goods permit a tangible relationship to the past as a source of displaced meaning” (1993: 61). At once material (tangible) and debased (junk), these objects enable a passing of the baton whose very lack of definition (since they are debased and come from a stranger) opens up the possibility of a redefinition of the past. They act as “bridges” between collective and individual memory.⁶

A Book and an Exhibition

For the book *Vide-Greniers*, Philippe Gabel and I started with the question of the *value* of used objects. We began with the idea that yard-sale objects provide an opportunity to tell a story – a story that the objects themselves seem to contain, or that we project onto them. They act as props for our own memories. It is precisely on this point that Philippe Gabel’s work met mine: the idea that people are able to project a story onto these objects, these remnants of objects, with their traces and their past. People recognise that these objects have a past and that from this past, they can imagine a future for them.

Second-hand objects allow us to interpret their wear and tear; their adulterations, lacks, cracks and breaks. What has happened to them? What have they witnessed? It is often impossible to say for sure.



Paris, 2006. Photo: P. Gabel



Lille, 1986. Photo: P. Gabel

Having acknowledged this strange power of objects, Philippe Gabel and I decided to lay the foundations for the book, and an accompanying exhibition, by handing out an invitation to bargain-hunters at yard sales (in the cites of Paris and Lille and in some villages in central France). Our approach was to offer them something of a game:

The Rules of the Game

You will be photographed with your object of choice: the object you have just bought from this yard sale.

You will then have to imagine this object's story, explain what you see in it, tell its tale.

Sometimes, both of you will pose in front of a projection screen or a wall.

You will stand there like two actors – an acting duo.

We thus invited customers to have their picture taken with an object they had just purchased from a yard sale, before asking them to write a text in which they would imagine the object's history. We gave people several weeks to write their texts that they then sent to us. Out of roughly a hundred people's pictures, eighty sent us a text (we published thirty-four of them in the book). Sometimes they wrote no more than one line, sometimes fifteen.

The descriptions, as well as the names given to objects, led to discrepancies of meaning; to fictions. While most of the objects they found at the yard sales were plain, ordinary things (often utilitarian objects), they were described by the people who purchased them as singular and extraordinary. The imaginative projections stimulated by the objects had less to do with the initial function of the object, which was generally banal, and more to do with the fact that the object had a prior life. When listing the objects, they added up to what appeared to be a sort of surreal grocery list – a cabinet of curiosities, or mere hallucinations. Here is a list of objects that people claim to have found in yard sales:

Quicksand
Fantasies
A Future Memory
A Cat Armchair
A Mystical Trance
A Famous Posture
A Little Ray of Sunshine
A Sesame
An Arrival in Venice
The Armistice
A Lady's Secret
A Module Used by Swiss Astronauts
Fear in its Belly
Far-Off Climes
A Passing Fancy
A Dream Come True
... and many more other weird and wonderful objects.

What do they tell us, these encounters with yard-sale objects? Objects that their proud new owners hold in their hands – by the hand. Often proffered in the direction of the camera. These objects – tangible figments of the imagination – are similar to the knickknacks which Pierre Sansot (1992) describes as being endowed with the power to produce dreams and transform reality.



Christophe Giolito, Paris, 2006. Photo: P. Gabel

*My future memories
I will take them all
I will fill them up
Then they will carry me away
My mind is made up
I'm settling down
Into perpetual motion
With my luggage
As sole weapon
I'll put them down here
For now,
Then, it will be here or there
Here and there
And everywhere*



Bruno Vasseur, Montrouge, 2006. Photo: P. Gabel

*A module used by Swiss spacemen during
their first mission to Uranus in 1959 and a half.*



Pascal Caillibot, Pantin, 2006. Photo: P. Gabel

*The Orient Express. The arrival in Venice.
Italy's most luxurious hotels.
In those days, people still knew how to take
it easy...*

Commonplace objects (with no redeeming features), quotidian, antiquated, clapped-out and even broken; objects reduced to almost nothing, which have finally “passed away” – such objects have the power to pass on something about what once came to pass. In these objects whose time has passed, whose outdatedness is the space of loss of their former use value or history, loss opens up the possibility of redemption through theatricality. Such objects seem to harbour reserves of meaning. The objects one finds in yard sales share the poverty of a present or a future destined to come to an end. They are subjected to displacements – customisations/requalifications – of their initial use, and therefore meaning. Yard sales cultivate an art of recycling, an appropriative practice whereby displaced objects acquire a second meaning, allowing the introduction of a poetic practice where utilitarian concerns once prevailed. Yard-sale objects are endowed with a transformative power: the power to become something else, to tell *a new story*. We cannot but try to imagine the object’s history – by observing and manipulating it. The tentative nature of our reading is compounded by the sheer weirdness of some yard-sale objects.

Having said that, the strangest objects are usually to be found in flea markets. I often visit the Porte de Clignancourt market which attracts 120 000 visitors every weekend, making it the 4th most popular destination for tourists in France ahead of the Louvre museum. These field visits provide me with ample opportunity to draw up lists of curios. Useless objects, out of time, out of place: a pair of airline seats, for instance. In some cases, one is led to wonder not only “What is it for?” but also “What on earth is it?”: a whale’s eardrum, a “foldable cake stand”. You can even find things that do not exist: a space dog, a stuffed unicorn’s head...



A pair of airline seats, Paris, 2012. Photo: O. Debary



A space dog, Paris, 2012. Photo: O. Debary

The uncertainty of our reading – “What is it?”, “What is it for?”, “Real or fake?” – is reminiscent of the uncertainty of memory itself, full of holes and absences that the present conjures up from the past. From this point of view, the past is always chosen by the present – “authentically remade”, as James Clifford puts it (2004: 20). For art historian Carl Einstein, this new history is a space of creativity and freedom: “Our slim chance of freedom lies precisely in the dissonance between the hallucinatory and the structure of objects – the possibility of changing the order of things” (1929: 98). The power of objects to become something else goes back to the meaning “dreaming” took on at the end of the 12th century: “...to be a prey to a nocturnal vision because the objects we saw clearly during the day return all confused and mixed up in our inner vision” (Godefroy 1982). Second-hand objects, objects which have a back-story – a history – place us in a dreamlike state.⁶

To conclude, I would like to return to one of the first experiences that led Philippe Gabel and I, in April 2011, to exhibit our work in a temple devoted to objects: *Leroy Merlin*, the largest D.I.Y. store in France.



Paris, Leroy-Merlin, 2011. Photo: P. Gabel



Paris, Leroy-Merlin, 2011: Photo: P. Gabel

In addition to the book, we conceived our exhibition as a means of prolonging the work, thanks to the financial backing of the store, which found something of an echo of its own past in our project. Shops of this type are present the world over nowadays, but the first Leroy Merlin was opened by Adolphe Leroy and Rose Merlin in the wake of the First World War to sell off some US Army surplus. Developing the same approach of selling what they had managed to “retrieve”, they expanded with kit homes and other construction materials. They switched the shop name from “Stock Américain” to “Leroy Merlin” in 1960.

Our exhibition was set up in a corridor, at one of the entrances to the store situated in the southern part of Paris. Our aim was to appeal to shoppers in this Mecca for D.I.Y. enthusiasts – in the very heart of the consumer society – and invite them to think about the power of objects, their power to spark dreams, and more particularly the power of the used object to generate new creation.



Paris, Leroy-Merlin, 2011: Photo: P. Gabel



Paris, Leroy-Merlin, 2011: Photo: T. Wendling

The main problem we faced was how to attract the attention of punters rushing by in pursuit of their own D.I.Y. dream. We saw all these people flooding in, holding shopping lists of things to buy and build. So we thought, we are going to offer consumers another list of objects, albeit a slightly more unusual one: an alternative shopping list made up of objects found in yard sales: *A Future Memory*, *Quicksand*, *A Few Fantasies*, *An Armchair for Cats*, *A Mystical Trance*, *A Famous Posture*, *A Woman's Secret*, *Faraway Climes...*

The names of all these enigmatic objects were posted on the escalators leading up to the store. Loudspeaker announcements were made of this list, explaining that the objects could be found in the hall. Posters were also hung in the aisles.



Paris, Leroy-Merlin, 2011: Photo: P. Gabel



Paris, Leroy-Merlin, 2011: Photo: P. Gabel



Paris, Leroy-Merlin, 2011: Photo: P. Gabel



Paris, Leroy-Merlin, 2011: Photo: P. Gabel

Pictures of all the yard-sale objects were on show in our exhibition. This appeal to shoppers – which was, among other things, an appeal to stop shopping – found its limits, on the fifth day, when all our posters were taken down by the store manager. The posters in the aisles (figures 14, 15) which invited the customers to see the exhibition, were considered by him as an incitement to get out of the space of shopping. The opening of the exhibition, on a late-shopping evening, offered us the chance to explain our work and why we had chosen to install it in this location. While the posters were rapidly removed, the photos remained in place for two months and the names of the objects on the escalators were left for several more weeks. Our aim was to encourage D.I.Y. enthusiasts to draw a parallel between their passion for making and transforming things – in other words, for creation – and the power of old yard-sale objects to trigger daydreams, to become dreamt objects found in broad daylight.

When time-worn objects exchange hands in yard sales the point is not simply to recycle them, or save them from oblivion. Some do, of course, find new owners because they are still “good for something”, but others open up to different kind of fate where they will serve no purpose beyond decoration. In all cases, these second-hand markets give objects a reprieve by extending their lifespans, by keeping alive something that buyers see in them: a reserve value, an opportunity to seize passing time; an opportunity to remember.

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Notes

¹ See *Vide-greniers*, Paris, Créaphis, 2012, O. Debary and H.S Becker (text) and P. Gabel (photographs). The exhibition showcasing our work was held in unusual locations like a writer's residency (Maison Jules-Roy, Vézelay, June 2010), an art gallery (Espace Beaufort, Paris, November 2010), universities (University of Chicago Center in Paris, October 2011; Université Paris Descartes, Galerie Saint-Germain, November 2012), a library, a bookshop, as well as a huge Parisian DIY store, *Leroy Merlin* — France's answer to America's *The Home Depot* or Sweden's *Clas Ohlson*. More on this at the end of the article.

² Gell's thesis should not be restricted to a theory of art: it opens up onto wider considerations of the power and life of objects. See, for instance, Janet Hoskins's work on the importance of objects for the Kodi in eastern Indonesia, particularly during the mourning process (1998).

³ These separated moments of the mourning process have been analysed by Robert Hertz in his study "The double obsequies" (1928).

⁴ There are still some instances of this practice, particularly in the north of Europe and in Sweden. The *gårdsauktioner* (or *sommarauktioner*) are auctions that take place in rural contexts either in the town or village hall, or directly in the home of the deceased (the house is also sometimes sold in this manner). More unusually, people are invited in some towns to enter the apartment of the deceased and buy which ever objects they fancy. The point can be to resolve any problems in the split of an inheritance. And if the inheritors choose not to hold an auction, the split can be made by an antiques dealer who is invited to establish the value of and potentially buy the possessions.

⁵ This work has to involve a process of forgetting, as Freud has taught us, or at least a process of repression as a means of suppressing a painful memory. There are two forms of forgetting in Freud's account: forgetting that is linked to repression and the difficulty of remembering (screen memories) and forgetting that is the work of grief, that is, the process of recomposition and expression of something that has happened, leading to the production of a new memory. In this sense, grief serves to replace absence, to represent it and, to some extent, to accompany the loss by representing it with another object. These lost memories are never fully lost, but rather transformed or replaced. In the same way, the "lost" object, the one that is the object of our grief, is found again in another form after separation. It becomes another object, or a "remainder". See Freud (1985).

⁶ Markets of this type are often regarded as alternative spaces. It would be a mistake, however, to depict them as centers of an underground economy or as spaces of pure (non-financial) sociability. As Michèle de La Pradelle points out, "We must defeat this kind of hasty resistance which leads us

to assume that social relations are diluted or erased whenever economic stakes are high, and that a gratuitous sociability flourishes freely as soon as they are limited” (1996: 13-14).

⁶ This power held by the used object is of great interest to the surrealists. From the 1920s on, surrealism drew on the idea of the object as dream, reusing it, adapting it, transforming it. Flea markets were key hunting grounds for André Breton who amassed a vast collection of strange objects, seemingly devoid of use or aesthetic value. This passion for useless objects gave them back their freedom (the absence of any end) and unhitched them from their commercial destiny (their exchange value). As Emmanuel Guignon stresses, this type of objects is “freed from its utilitarian servitudes; every object can be made to change meaning and use” (2005: 11).

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