"There is no such thing as waste":
Redoing concepts of materials and values in the Shrub

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FIG 1: Shrub Swap and Reuse Hub
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Introduction

The Shrub is a Swap and Reuse HUB, and its components are epitomized by an up-cycled chandelier placed in its 'living room'. The chandelier is made through a creative reuse of 'Shrub-things'; it is consisting of three bicycle wheel frames connected by a bar, and from each of them hang half a dozen light bulbs, as well as forks and spoons of steel, making it all shine. The wheels represent the Shrub's free bicycle repair workshop. The cutlery represents the Food Sharing group that collects food which would otherwise be wasted. The reuse of things symbolises the swapshop, which facilitates swapping of 'waste'. Furthermore, the Shrub runs many workshops to empower people in leading sustainable lifestyles. The aim behind all these activities is to challenge capitalism by creating a circular economy and create a waste-free society. Moreover, it is a co-operative run by volunteers as well as a few paid employees, most of whom are students.

In order to narrow down the focus of our ethnographic project we asked the question: in what ways are the Shrub challenging capitalist conceptions of waste, materials and value? To answer this we looked into the Shrub's waste regime, ideas of materiality and alternative currency, called 'Tokens'. In the following we will firstly discuss the politics surrounding how the Shrub classifies waste. Then, when looking at ideas of materiality, we examine how the Shrub conceptualises materials as things rather than objects, and how this is a way of redoing and rethinking capitalist constructs. We finish by considering Tokens as a 'micro-political challenge' to capitalism. Overall, we demonstrate how the Shrub creates tools that allow it to challenge capitalist conceptions. However, we also argue that a certain level of knowledge within the space is required to understand and navigate within the Shrub.

As in the Shrub, capitalism will here refer to the current predominant economic system. In varying contexts, we gathered that 'Shrubbers' (Shrub-members) largely consider capitalism as linearly 'growth-based' (Jackson 2009), and thus inherently wasteful and ecologically destructive. The Shrub aims to challenge this by working towards a circular economy, namely the circulation of resources for as long as possible by regenerating products, thus striving for a 'prosperity without growth' (Jackson 2009).

Methodology

The Shrub is open for the public, but our accessibility was increased by the fact that we bought £10 year-long Shrub-memberships, and were students like the majority there. Before we began our research, two of us had already established some rapport through attending workshops and volunteering there. We all, however, came to feel the "ethnographer's strangeness" (Emerson et al. 1995:36) – either automatically, or in a more cultivated way, in order to estrange the familiar.

When we asked for permission to study the Shrub, we were welcomed with the members' symbol of shaking hands in the air, which is the agreed upon way of showing agreement or enthusiasm in The Shrub's meetings. We thus comfortably observed and participated in workshops, swapshop open hours, meetings and more. For events we also assisted in re-organizing furniture which helped us embody the space. Overall, our interviewees were self-critical, but we are aware that they, as employed members, only represent a particular perspective on the Shrub. Furthermore, whilst we were interested in them both as persons and informants, they were interested in us as humans and researchers. This balanced positioning influenced our methodology; our semi-structured interviews were co-constructions and exchanges between interviewer and interviewee (Heyl 2001:370).
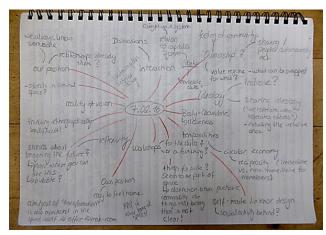
FIG 2 (left): The "Living room" of the Shrub. FIG 3 (right): The authors during their backstage process. Photos © Laura Assmann

Sharing experiences and developing thoughts and mind-maps together, as well as the writing process itself were essential elements of our ethnography's backstage research process. When refining our themes we tried to be aware of not skewing information to suit us, but instead allow our argument to 'grow' from our data; sprouting. However, whilst participant-observation and interviews were co-constructions with Shrubbers, it became evident that our writing represents a further reconstruction (Heyl 2001:370) that is less mutual. This leads us to question what we can represent, and who we make this ethnography for. While we recognise that a report like this is standard in academia, we feel that we inevitably misrepresent the Shrub when we decontextualise our experiences to fit them into this written format. It therefore becomes important to emphasise that what we experienced and here present in writing are only "partial truths" (Clifford 1986).

Redefining waste

Waste is at the heart of the Shrub, which wants to redefine waste as a resource, in a bid to create a world where there is no such thing as waste. It is worth looking at this project of revaluation through the lens of Douglas (1970), who asserts that dirt is matter out of place, violating some ideal sense of the ways things ought to be. This is applicable to the Shrub, where wasting is recognised as dangerous to the environment. The existence of waste, physically and as a category, violates a sense of how things ought to be according to the Shrub, that is, reusing rather than wasting. Thus, in promoting this notion of circular economy, the Shrub directly challenges capitalism and its prevailing conceptions of waste as something 'inevitable'. However, we can also move beyond this and see how the Shrub is a political space often in opposition to capitalism, and how 'waste' is redefined to mobilise this opposition. Bearing these politics in mind, 'the matter out of place'-logic at play in the Shrub is then a tool for challenging capitalism, which we will further demonstrate.

Categorisation of waste is important for political mobilisation. Reno (2015), for example, discusses how the category "toxic waste" has produced new international policies. This is in line with the Shrub's definition of waste as something that can be measured in CO_2. This redefines waste as active and consequential, where it has a carbon footprint. We witnessed this at an open meeting, where it was explained that the Shrub must measure the CO_2-amount it saves, as per requirement of the primary funder, the Junior Climate Challenge Fund. This transforms, for example, three bags of old clothes into a weight in CO_2. Beyond this redefinition of waste in order to navigate funding bodies, it is also a way of framing waste as a hazard, with CO_2 implying environmental degradation. The Shrub can then promote their agenda of waste reduction and circular economy. The 'hazard-framing' raises issues of scale for environmental activism (Moore 2012), as the redefinition of waste can be deployed across different scales of governance. In our case we can see the CO_2-discourse applied in the Shrub's activism, both on the national scale (when applying for grants) and on the personal, which refers to individual consumption measured in CO_2. Thus CO_2 is used as a tool to keep individuals' ethics in check.
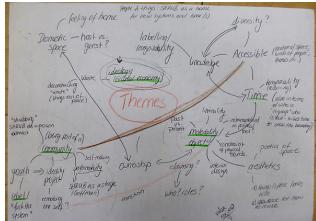
FIG 4 & 5: The Messy Process of the Shrub Ethnography: These mind-maps portray a little peek into the messiness of the initial writing and analysis. This is how our ethnography looked like the first days of the writing process. Photos © Laura Assmann

In summary the Shrub sees waste as matter out of place, when it should rather be in the Shrub where it will be reconceptualised, becoming a part of the swapshop. This 'matter out of place'-logic is facilitated by a variety of constructions of waste. Waste is, for example, measured in and reconceptualised as CO^2, allowing an engagement with the politics of climate justice in connoting environmental hazard, seen to incite change, while also acting as an effective tool for measuring individuals' ethics. Revaluing waste thus presents tools, and is also a tool in itself for the Shrub to challenge capitalist conceptions.

Materiality

Through having their own value regime the Shrub actively constructs certain ideas about what materials are and can be. The Shrub, due to legal national categorisations, is officially a 'waste-handling organization' and things that the Shrub gets or collects is first considered 'waste' by law. Nonetheless, the Shrub conceptually (and sometimes also physically) transform the 'waste' into reusable things. This highlights the changeability of material conceptions. However, 'waste' is only one of many categorisations that can be culturally attributed to things. In their so-called 'social life', things can change status several times (Appadurai 1986). Firstly, time might be a factor (Kopytoff 1986). A shiny blue handbag was, for example, bought as a commodity and later given as official 'waste' to the Shrub which then assigned it new value. Secondly, things can be understood differently from one person to another (Kopytoff 1986:78-79). While the shiny handbag is officially considered 'waste' when the Shrub first receive it Shrubbers would not talk about it in these terms; they would merely call it a handbag. Ellie (interview-transcript, 13/02/16), a Shrub-employee, framed it as "there is no such thing as waste, only stuff in the wrong place". She explained it as a problem of unequal social distribution; if people have things they do not need, and discard them (which is socially fully accepted), it is legitimately waste, even if (less affluent) others could have used them. As the Shrub's categorisations contrast the society's, and critique social distribution, its value regime challenges capitalist conceptions, and redefines what things are or can be.

Through its workshops and do-it-yourself (DIY) interior design, the Shrub actively challenges conceptions of materiality, encouraging people to perceive materials as things rather than objects. This refers to Heidegger's distinction between objects as static in form and function, and things as gatherings of changeable materials (Ingold 2012:436). Thinging, notifying engagement with things (ibid), is essential to the Shrub. The interior design, such as the wooden book shelves, and the bike-wheel-cutlery chandelier are built and upcycled from different materials, namely things. The Shrub also hosts several DIY-workshops that we participated in. Through actual hands-on modulation of things, participants learnt how sheets of papers can become books, and how to upcycle a picture frame into a blackboard. However, after these workshops, it is not merely sheets of paper and picture frames that we could now see as things rather than objects. It inspired a broader reconsideration process; what we deemed objects before, were in fact materials in movement. This is not to say that everything in the Shrub is upcycled. In fact, the newest feature for the Shrub is another chandelier,

FIG 6 (left): Self-made book © Anna Thomsen. FIG 7 (centre): Bag made of juice cardboard boxes © The Shrub, posted on the 'Swap & Reuse HUB "Shrub" Co-operative' Facebook page, Apr. 2016. Fig 8 (right): Self-made blackboard © Anna Thomsen

and the creator admitted, almost with a jokingly guilt, that the jars surrounding the light bulbs and adding a DIY-look, were bought new. This, of course, matters for the amount of carbon footprint that the chandelier 'costs'. However, it does not refute our argument; whether or not the jars are recycled, the builder engages with glass as things, finding new usages based upon the materials initial affordance. Conventionally there is an over-emphasis on the artefact and finished object (Ingold 2012:435), and therefore thinging, and considering materials as things rather than objects are ways of redoing and rethinking established conceptualisations.

However, it is not necessarily obvious to see how the Shrub challenges usual conceptions of things, due to the difficulty of displaying alternatives while keeping some framework recognisable. When walking into the Shrub it might easily seem like a charity shop and you can navigate within it as such; find a sweater, buy it and leave, without ever knowing that the Shrub is a swap-shop not a charity. This is possible because the Shrub has agreed to standardising criteria, for instance, giving everything a price tag so that things can either be swapped or sold. However, looking closer, a complexity is revealed. It is unknown whether the couch, and other furniture is for sale. Another confusion is the tea: as one of us walked confidently around in the Shrub, she was asked by newcomers, if she could make them some tea. A regular Shrubber would know that anyone may have tea, that they can make it themselves on their own initiative. These confusions show a discrepancy of knowledge and thus confidence between people in the Shrub.

Tokens

After these rather broad themes, we were eager to explore a specific tool, namely Tokens that the Shrub has implemented as a challenge to predominant capitalist structures.

> The Shrub provides the infrastructure for a more circular way of using things. I guess Tokens
> are just a part of that. They allow us to play with currency and make our own rules...
> - Charlie, a Shrub-employee

Sam, a volunteer, described Tokens as "a very easy alternative currency, where one pound is equal to one Token". The Tokens are digital and Shrub-members can acquire Tokens through volunteering or in exchange for things.

Alternative currency networks are commonly depicted as a micropolitical challenge to capitalism as well as a tool in "building a more liberated economy and society" (North 2010:73), however, as it will be shown with regards to the Shrub, these structures come along with contradictions and tensions.

Through our research we soon realised that, despite the invention of Tokens, people within the Shrub largely make sense of material value in terms of pounds. Mette High (2013) contextualises this observation in emphasising that the value of things is determined by local sociocultural understandings; that is, in our case, capitalist understandings of value. Therefore, whilst we first thought that the Tokens were somewhat contradictory or pretentious as their value is shaped by the pound, we realised how our own perceptions are also pound-dominated.

> The thing with Tokens is that it doesn't matter if we overvalue or undervalue things because that way we do not have any loss in pounds... We can't give out something that we don't really have [referring to pounds], but we have loads of stuff, so in a way we have endless Tokens but we don't have endless money.
>
> - Charlie, a Shrub-employee

This quote illustrates that while the Shrub does not have money to exchange with, it is wealthy in things, and thus shows how it successfully challenges and departs from capitalist normative wealth. The Token-system is a safeguard to protect the Shrub from making economic losses within the system it has to operate in and at the same time a tool that drives people to spend their acquired value in the Shrub. Tokens are ultimately an instrument in experimenting with and facilitating an alternative exchange network that puts emphasis on swapping objects rather than buying them on the High Street.

Another aspect that stood out during our research is the attempt to keep things local and circulating within the Shrub. Alternative currencies are commonly portrayed as localising tools which simultaneously seek to build community and enhance social inclusion (North and Longhurst 2013). During one of the open meetings, a volunteer suggested to give out free Tokens to members of the public to get more people involved with the Shrub. This inspired us to think further about Tokens as a tool for community building.

During a group meeting, one of us realised that they did not know that they had acquired Tokens in the course of becoming a Shrub-member. Despite our attentiveness there clearly was a lack of knowledge. In one of the semi-structured interviews Charlie likewise emphasised the inaccessibility of the Token-system: "The entire system of the Shrub is already a bit confusing and Tokens are just another part of that. People
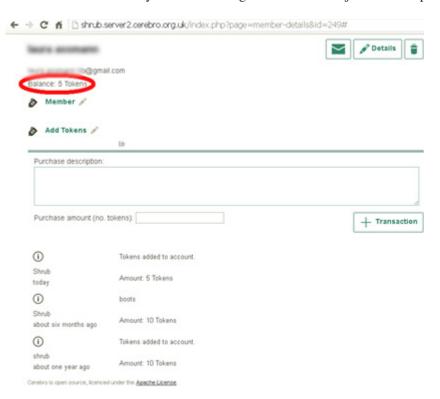

Fig 9: Screenshot of the Tokens
Photo © Laura Assmann, Mar. 2016

are simply not used to it and it remains quite inaccessible". In line with this, Gritzas and Kavoulakos (2015) highlight that knowledge discrepancies may lead to a loss of community feeling. This may be due to, even if not overtly expressed, perceived power relations between a knowledgeable core group and the rest of the members, despite the aforementioned democratic principles. This relates back to the former point that certain knowledge and experience is necessary to navigate within the Shrub and understand that it challenges capitalist conventions.

While we found that the Token-system is still shaped by the economic structures that it tries to deconstruct. It is an instrument that facilitates and promotes the swapping and reuse aspect of the Shrub, and thus challenges current capitalist norms and its waste production. In a broader sense they come to embody a "different kind of sociotemporality than that experienced in the world market" (Harvey 1996:237–8), thus, bridging the tension between rebelling against the system while having to survive within it. However, building on interviews and own experiences it has been shown that whilst accessible to informed members, the Shrub's system remains somewhat inaccessible to a broader range of people due to discrepancies of knowledge.

Conclusion

We have explored the ways in which the Shrub challenges capitalist conceptions of waste, materials and values, thus refocusing on the underpinnings of the Shrub. We have argued that the Shrub uses different methodologies and tools to revaluate and redo what materials are, and how they can be circulated. These tools include, but are not limited to, the Token-system and the Shrub's creation of a value regime which encourages people to rethink waste and materials as things. In doing so the Shrub succeeds in providing an alternative infrastructure through which things are reconceptualised, redistributed, and thus reused. While the Shrub seems to empower people, we experienced a discrepancy of knowledge between well-established members and new-comers; a knowledge that is essential to successfully navigate through the physical as much as the sociopolitical space of the Shrub. Nevertheless, we have realised that the Shrub is a 'space of hope' (Harvey 2000) where people can engage in an alternative place of social and economic exchanges.

At the end of our journey, and realising that our words can only reflect partial truths of the Shrub's richness, we are still left with several questions. Does the Shrub's virtue lie in being local, or could it find success in expansion? To what extend does the Shrub produce waste? Another aspect that would deserve further investigation is whether spaces like the Shrub actually work, in terms of potentially reaching its goal of abolishing capitalism and its wasteful procedures, or if places like the Shrub rather provides a space that can mitigate market failures, allowing people to endure within its structures, and thus even impede radical system change. Future research could also look closer at how the Shrub facilitates personal rebellion against neoliberal expansion in everyday life and how this might relate to change and the challenge of capitalism on a systemic level.

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