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Mobilising Creativity: Trash and Sydney's Garage Sale Trail

Karma Chahine

Abstract: This paper examines the concept of mobility in relation to The Garage Sale Trail in Sydney. Coupled with notions of creativity in discourses of 'creative renewal', trash has the capacity to be mobile. The multitude of trajectories offered by "creative" ways of thinking about waste challenge a singular and fixed notion of trash, and offer alternative trajectories for trash to travel. I argue that The Garage Sale Trail invests heavily in the idea of the mobility of trash and that this mobility is central in conceiving of new trajectories for the future of the city.

If only you knew what trash gives rise / To verse, without a tinge of shame

Anna Akhmatova, "I have no use for Odic Legions"

The creative potential of trash was embodied on the side of a Sydney garbage truck. In 2013, as part of the City of Sydney local government's strategy to promote the Sydney Writers' Festival, excerpts from literature were displayed on garbage trucks and street furniture around the city (City of Sydney 2014). On the side of one truck that passed by the University of Sydney's main campus were the words 'Creative City' and an excerpt from late Australian poet, Martin Harrison's poem, 'Walking Back from the Dam'. It read:

It's that dense, this thick, this feeling of time –
this feeling of walking back alone under
the trees. As if somehow, the whole world's in
another tense. Or as if you could still be young,
striding back, shadow-flinging, across the grass
in light sharp as a knife-blade, pools of it (Harrison 2001)

The elegant, nostalgic evocations of Harrison's poem met their unlikely vehicle of expression in the garbage truck. Trash appears to transcend itself. In close contact with poetry, trash appears to go beyond a state of something to be disposed of and beyond

the affective responses of shame and disgust. As the truck travelled along its regular course it signaled possibility outwards, that trash could appear prominently and with different connotations, and that formerly static words can engage in movement. This display echoes Walter Moser when he writes that “a new relationship between waste and culture is in the midst of emerging: a less negative, more ambivalent, and certainly more complex relationship” (2002, 3). In October of 2015, the same City of Sydney garbage trucks were advertising the yearly event, The Garage Sale Trail. In a Twitter post on 19 October, 2015, the Garage Sale Trail (@GarageSaleTrail) posted an image of the trucks displaying the message “More treasure than trash? Register a sale today!” In both instances the trucks bring to light the ways in which trash is being signaled as something to be reconsidered.

The above example is emblematic of the way that trash figures in a multitude of local government initiatives in Sydney, within art, DIY projects, and sustainability discourses as the site for creative transformation. Repurposing, revaluing, and upcycling trash is often seen as central to envisioning a sustainable future as well as fostering ties within local communities. Trash, then, emerges as a mobile concept, with the ability to traverse between hierarchies of value. Considered in these contexts, what was once trash can be reimagined, remade, and revalued. This capacity for trash to be rethought also generates a capacity to think differently about the future. In remaking trash, we are told that we can remake the relationship we have to a sustainable future and to one another. In this way, trash imagined as a mobile concept is said to enable other mobilities to take place.

This paper will briefly sketch some of the ways in which the discourse of ‘creative renewal’ operates within the context of the Garage Sale Trail in Sydney. I use ‘creative renewal’ to refer broadly to ideas and practices that aim to imbue trash, waste, empty spaces, second-hand objects, and so on, with creative value, often with broader social goals in mind. This is not to say that what is considered trash is objectively transformed into something creative, or that The Trail necessarily succeeds in fostering other mobilities. Rather, I argue that the discourse of the creative renewal of waste is invested in the idea of mobility. Specifically, this paper will outline the context of The Trail, the ways in which trash is said to be semantically mobile, as well as the way in which creative interventions into trash such as The Trail are said to mobilise a sense of community.

Creative mobilities

The linguistic terrain of trash is scattered with concepts. These include “debris, detritus, dirt, dreck, garbage, junk, leavings, leftovers, litter, refuse, remains, rubbish, scraps, smut...” (Moser 2002, 86). Trash, then, cannot be reduced to a singular concept (Scanlan 2005, 14). Neither is it a static concept. As Anna Davies (2012, 191) writes, waste has ‘multiple mobilities’. It can be moved from one place to another and have its parts transformed, deconstructed, and altered (191).

The discourse of creative renewal that surrounds trash relies on this mobility and the potential for trash to become something else. This discourse gains traction from broader do-it-yourself (DIY) urbanism, loosely characterised as a set of practices by non-professional actors focused on revitalising ‘wasted’ spaces. (Deslandes 2013, 216-217).

The creative renewal of trash also gains momentum in the context of what has been termed the ‘Creative City’ (Landry & Bianchini 1995), where the concept of creativity is central in government policies directed towards retrieving a city’s economic and cultural life (Edensor et al. 2010, 1). In policy language, particularly in terms of ‘resource recovery’, trash is associated less with a linear model, and increasingly as part of the circular economy that moves away from the idea of trash as an end-product (Gregson et al. 2015, 219). Instead, “wastes become resources to be recovered and revalorized, through recycling and reuse” (219).

This dynamism attached to the concept of trash is used to propel statements calling for the remaking of our relationship towards it. As “eco-capitalist” and author of the book ‘Outsmart Waste’, Tom Szaky, declares: “WASTE IS OVER”. Echoing Susan Strasser’s claim that “Nothing is inherently trash” (1999, 5), he writes that “we just need to see the value inherent in what we discard” and that with creativity we can look upon trash with a new perspective (77). These ideas are, too, found within local government rhetoric. The City of Sydney’s Waste Management scheme includes tips on recycling and reducing waste, calls to “make mulch not landfill” (City of Sydney 2015a), and notes ranging from conscious consumerism, decluttering, do-it-yourself recycling and methods for minimising food waste in its Green Villages email newsletter (City of Sydney 2015b).

The environmental co-operative Reverse Garbage in Sydney's Inner West suburb of Marrickville also participates in this discourse: "resources are sorted at our Marrickville Warehouse and made available to the general public for creative use – or 'reuse' – using resources to create new items or to give items a new purpose. For example, using coat hangers to make a lampshade, or wooden pallets to make furniture" (Reverse Garbage 2015). Similarly, local art projects participate in the idea of creative renewal. As the 2014 art exhibition, curated by Sydney's Corner Cooperative titled 'USELESS' ("Useless exhibition" 2014) describes its aims: "the throwaway nature of our consumer culture means that almost everything is disposable, and subsequently often wasted... Emphasising the importance of sustainability, USELESS foregrounds the need for society to re-imagine the endless possibilities of the everyday". Trash has come to the forefront in efforts to divert it from being seen as an end product to something that generates possibility. What new trajectories emerge, then, when trash veers off the tracks headed towards landfill?

The Garage Sale Trail

Image 1. Garage Sale Trail Sign¹

¹ "Garage Sale Trail Sign", Karma Chahine, taken 24 October 2015.

Garage sales, or yard sales, are defined as “the informal sale of personal possessions from within or next to a private residence” (Herrmann 1997, 913). The Garage Sale Trail is a national Australian initiative that aims to hold garage sales once a year on the same day. It is referred to as the ‘biggest community and sustainability event in Australia’ (Garage Sale Trail 2015a). It encourages residents, businesses, schools, charities, and community groups to participate. Once a seller registers a sale, it is plotted on an online map along with details of the sale, including a name, description, and the location. Sellers are encouraged to market their sales in a fun and creative fashion to attract buyers (Garage Sale Trail 2015a).

Image 2. Residential Garage Sale²

Participating in The Trail as a seller means marketing a privately-owned space, community hall, or sidewalk, and participating as a buyer involves the tracking of these sales via an online map and travelling along the trail.

Image 3. Online map of the Trail³

The organisers describe the event as follows:

² “Residential Garage Sale”, Karma Chahine, taken 24 October 2015.

³ “Online map of the Trail”, Screenshot, taken 24 October 2015,
<http://garagesaletrail.com.au>

The Garage Sale Trail is about sustainability, community and creativity. By organising communities around Australia to hold garage sales on the same day we aim to reduce waste to landfill and enable community-based conversations between local government, business, householders, community groups, cultural institutions, makers and creators, charities and schools (Garage Sale Trail 2015b).

From these aims we can discern that the Garage Sale Trail involves a conscious intervention into the idea that trash is a singular end-point fixed in time; that by stopping second-hand objects from falling “out of place” (Mary Douglas 1966), or falling out of time⁴, waste can be given new lives. This challenges some of the dominant ways of thinking about trash as a pragmatic issue for environmental policy and something in need of disposal. It questions the notion that trash, along with its sensory offences, should be, “out of sight, out of mind”. The discursive positioning of waste as a matter for creative intervention and creative renewal undoes a simplistic understanding of trash. It challenges the idea that waste is fixed in its status as worthless, where “waste is uncomplicatedly the rejected and worthless stuff that needs to be distanced from the societies that produce it or otherwise converted into value via technological and organizational innovation” (David Evans, Hugh Campbell and Anne Murcott 2013, 6-7). Secondly, it challenges the notion that waste is an inherent property (7). And thirdly, it challenges the idea that “this unproblematic designation of certain things as ‘waste’ is given by the imperatives of waste management” (7).

⁴ William Viney argues that not only can waste be thought of as “matter out of place”, it is also “matter out of time”. He writes that “with our recognition of waste comes an acknowledgement of time’s passing, its power to organize notions of wearing, decay, transience and dissolution and its power to expose that organizing function, to disclose how things are imbued with a sense of duration, punctuation and intermission that makes time an explicit, tangible thing of thought” (Viney 2014, 3).

Second-hand objects or objects that would have been discarded are referred to by The Trail as “unwanted treasures” (Garage Sale Trail 2015c). Residents and community groups are encouraged to think of their things as capable of traversing between hierarchies of value, as well as objects that could be physically transformed, in the case of the upcycled product. In one such example on the Instagram page of the Garage Sale Trail, two white metal-framed chairs sit in the foreground on a paved garden surface, surrounded by plush pillows and greenery. Both the chairs feature colourful striped cushion covers. The caption of the image is as follows: “These chairs were spotted on the roadside waiting council collection, probably to end up in landfill. Once home new cushion covers added and the rust deliberately saved, as there is beauty in imperfection. We think they look great!” (Garage Sale Trail 2015d).

The chairs, once imbued with value (though remnants of their less desirable future remains in the rust as a memory of their transformation), are said to divert the linearity of the product-cycle and signal the different directions “trash” could take. If, as Tim Edensor (2005) argues, social order relies to some extent on objects being distributed in their “proper” spaces (311-312), here there is a reconfiguration of the social order and the “proper”. The Garage Sale Trail is thus invested in the idea of movement. These are movements throughout space (from the roadside to the home) as well as movements through time (from a future in the landfill to a future reintegrating the object into the social order). If, as Herrmann writes, garage sales can be characterized as “treasure trove[s] of past material culture and outdated consumer fads” (Herrmann 2006, 137), in bringing back the past and imbuing it with value, this intervention into the present will

change the course not only of the object but also of sustainability itself. An intervention into the future, then, is said to require action in the present.

Mobilising Community

Local government support for The Trail from the City of Sydney is strong, with the Lord Mayor of Sydney, Clover Moore stating: “We’re running out of landfill and we also know that it’s really important to bring communities together to look for solutions to the very big issues that we’re facing. A garage sale is the perfect answer....” (Buchanan and Ellis 2012).

The Garage Sale Trail is invested not only in the mobility of waste objects, but also the mobility of people. The word ‘trail’ implies movement: it signifies action that is capable of occurring with a certain space, a series of successive steps or flows. This movement is aided by directional signage in the form of flyers and banners attached to street furniture and other public fixtures.

Image 4. Directional sign⁵

Online maps on The Trail’s website gesture towards routes not yet taken, neighbourhood paths that could be better-trodden, the connections to be forged

⁵ “Directional sign”, Karma Chahine, taken 25 October 2014.

between people, and the potentialities of moving and walking throughout space and time.

The mobilisation of ‘community’ as central to the aims of The Trail relies heavily on this capacity for movement. Emphasising the possibility of connection through movement, The Trail is referred to as an “old school social networking event”. Speaking at Ted X Sydney in a talk titled ‘Lose Clutter, Gain Friends’ (2012), one of the founders of The Trail, Darryl Nichols, spoke about the potential for residents to ‘to connect with their neighbours’. He emphasised that there was “a real sense of community spirit” that integrated “the older generation”, the “young hipster cool kids” and “the middle aged families” in a “grassroots community activity”.

Image 5. Garage Sale Trail⁶

The Trail is thus positioned as having the capacity to enable trash to become treasure, and to enable connection. This link between garage sales and community-building is not new. Herrmann writes that garage sales emerged in the United States amid a backdrop of political concerns that there was a lack of community (Herrmann 2006, 181). She argues that garage sales help foster this sense of community by providing a meeting

⁶ “Garage Sale Trail,” Flickr photo, taken 11 December 2006, posted by

newtown_graffiti, 15 October 2013,

https://www.flickr.com/photos/newtown_graffiti/10288547455/in/photolist-gfauhe-dkfhah-bekera-c67ab5-cd1fkb-c67pqa-cd1fwj-c7hrfl-c7hqk3/ (accessed September 5, 2015). Licence at <https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/2.0/>

place for the establishment of social ties across the exchange of goods (Herrmann 2006, 182). Urban planners too, as Margaret Crawford writes, have recognised the usefulness of garage sales in generating sociability and have used them as a technique to build community, with the goal of increasing “social capital” (2014, 32-33). Passing along items and the stories behind them, along with socialising, and providing a ‘gathering place’, have been some ways that garage sales have been said to increase social capital (Herrmann 2006, 182). This discourse of creative trash signals the capacity for not only trash to be transformed, but also the social relations around it. The Garage Sale Trail, then, relies heavily on the mobility of trash as a means of enabling connections.

Conclusion and future directions

The discourse of creative renewal of trash, as something that can travel between states of value, something that should be spatially diverted from landfill, and something that enables connections and communities to be made and re-made, relies heavily on the idea of mobility. However, in looking at the ways in which trash is said to be mobile, it is significant to note that there are many ways in which it is immobile. As Mimi Sheller and John Urry write, the new mobilities paradigm involves “tracking the power of discourses and practices of mobility in creating both movement and stasis” (2006, 211). There are still many ways in which trash is not able to travel the distance between waste and value, the way that it is metaphorically associated with certain bodies and subjectivities, and with alterity, marginality, and transgression. We can think about the ways in which the symbolic equivalence of hygiene and purity, and a physical distance

from trash has been overlaid along class, race, and gender lines, along with who is imbued with the power to dictate such categorization. As William Cohen (2005) writes in his book on filth, the same can be said about the closely aligned concept of trash:

Filth represents a cultural location at which the human body, social hierarchy, psychological subjectivity, and material objects converge. Standing at a theoretical crossroads, filth is at once figurative and substantive...it has as much to do with segments of the population rhetorically designated unwashed as with the water supply that might enable their cleansing (vii).

How mobile is “creative trash” and what of Akhmatova’s affective *tinges of shame*?

What forms of trash will not see a future on a brightly-decorated sidewalk and will be hidden as shameful objects in the back of the cupboard? What forms of community mobility are privileged over others? Who is counted in these new mobile communities? In thinking about the parameters of mobile trash, we can encounter ways in which an investment in mobility must consider encounters with inert ways of knowing trash in its various literal and figurative forms.

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