

From Trash to Treasure: Valuing Waste in Dumpster Diving

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Abstract

The paper, based on an ongoing research project conducted in Finland, examines voluntary dumpster diving as a practice of valuation. Its main questions are: How is voluntary dumpster diving intertwined with the question of value? And, conversely, what can dumpster diving teach us about practices of valuation more generally? The article proceeds via three steps. First, in order to emphasize the creative side of dumpster diving as a practice of valuation, we draw on Georg Simmel's theory of value, supplementing it with the concepts of actuality and virtuality, as elaborated by Gilles Deleuze. Second, we look more closely into the practicalities of valuation evident in dumpster diving. It involves a particular orientation to the urban environment that we call *the scavenger gaze*. Third, the informants also value the practice itself in relation to its societal relevance. They think about dumpster diving as a way of doing good and as part of an ecologically sound form of life. All in all, as value does not reside inherently in waste or would simply be merely the product of subjective judgment, the analyst must attend to multiple modes of valuation evident in the practice, among which there is no self-evident hierarchy.

Keywords: dumpster diving; valuation; food waste; scavenger gaze; waste; virtual value

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Introduction

In this article, we explore the connections between value and waste matter by considering voluntary dumpster diving for food. The practice implies recovering discarded items from trash bins, often those placed in supermarket backyards or in the vicinity of other commercial establishments. Reminiscent of Hermes in Greek mythology, dumpster divers cross the boundary from our world into that of the afterlife (of rubbish) and back—carrying plenty of delicacies. The study offers a double exposure on the topic of dumpster diving. On the one hand, we examine how this practice is intimately intertwined with the question of value, as it involves the transformation of trash into treasure in hands-on practices of valuation; on the other hand we ask what can dumpster diving teach us about valuation, more generally?

Despite its seemingly marginal nature, dumpster diving is a highly relevant and fruitful topic for valuation studies for the following reasons. First, practices related to waste and waste management are in general fertile ground for cultivating an understanding of the emergence and loss of value. Of course, classifying something as waste in itself involves valuation. Things become waste as a result of the separation of the valuable from the worthless. However, as, for example, Josh Lepawsky and Chris McNabb (2010: 186) have argued, materials do not simply follow a ‘one way transformation of value-to-waste along a linear chain of production-consumption-disposal’. Accordingly, recent waste scholarship has stressed that disposal does not inevitably lead to the annihilation of value (e.g. Gutberlet 2008; Reno 2009; Gille 2010; Lepawsky and McNabb 2010). For example, it is well known that the ideology of circular economy and the growing waste market in the Global North are rapidly changing the classification of rubbish from something unwanted and worthless into a source of value and profit. Further, scholars interested in scavenging have suggested that harvesting waste materials is a key economic activity in lower income countries in the Global South (e.g. Gregson and Crang 2015; Carenzo 2016a, 2016b). Because waste flows are rarely simply linear or even cyclical, following them calls for a close examination of the concrete ways in which things become waste, how waste is transformed into value, and also how other disposed materials fail to regain value (Gille 2010: 1054; Lepawsky and McNabb 2010: 186). We suggest that the transubstantiation and reclassification from waste to value is not simply a cognitive exercise but also involves lots of hands-on work, bodily practices, and heterogeneous techniques. This concrete activity of valuation in the borderline of purity and danger makes the practices of dumpster diving a fruitful research site. Thus, dumpster diving inevitably sensitizes the analyst to the dynamic nature of the category of waste; its contingency becomes especially clear when the ‘wasteness’ of waste is problematized or undone, as is

the case in the practices that we study.¹ When refused objects are recovered and gain new value they cease to be waste.

Second, dumpster diving provides a good case in point regarding how re-commodification is not the only way for discarded and assumedly dead matter to be resurrected. Instead of becoming reintegrated into capitalist commodity chains, rejected food items, for example, may also be discovered by someone diving into the waste container and make their way, in a plastic bag, to that person's home to be cooked as a meal, given as a gift, or placed in a freezer for later use. Whereas discussions on waste management often, at least implicitly, draw on a rather simplistic duality between use value and exchange value, our case shows that it is far too vague to rely on a general notion of 'use' when describing the multiple ways in which valuation is about more than just exchange value.

Third, dumpster diving also illuminates how the valuation of rubbish is intimately intertwined with other values and valuations of not only other things but also other practices, people, and even forms of life. By rescuing devalued or discarded matter, the divers judge the wastefulness of consumer capitalism and place value on the practice itself as a way of doing good.

The article is organized into four main sections. After briefly describing our research materials and how we use them, in the next section, we explicate the multifaceted and complex connections between dumpster diving and value. We draw our theoretical understanding of the practice of valuation from two sources. The first is the work of the sociologist and philosopher Georg Simmel, while the second is actual-virtual conceptual pairing as developed by the philosopher Gilles Deleuze. The latter we find helpful in coming to grips with the actualization of value in and by dumpster diving. After that, we look more closely into how valuing takes place through sorting out. We suggest that finding edible food in dumpsters requires a specific orientation toward the townscape that we call the *scavenger gaze*, inspired by the concept of the 'tourist gaze' introduced by John Urry (1990). The gaze always implicates the craft of scavenging, and both the gaze and the craft, in turn, rely on the use of various objects as technological prostheses. In the following section, we move from the practicalities of dumpster diving to examining how dumpster divers value not only waste matter but also the practice itself in a way that is different from the way surrounding society does. They take pride in doing good and see themselves as accomplishing something respectable and significant. Finally, we conclude the article by summing up the several modes of valuation involved in dumpster diving.

¹ On the indeterminacy of waste in relation to valuation, see also for example Strasser (1999), Hird (2012), and Liboiron (2012).

Research aims and materials

This article is based on ongoing empirical research conducted in Finland. The aim of the overall project is to understand the role of waste in contemporary life. For us, dumpster diving is an especially interesting case for the three reasons mentioned in the Introduction. In addition to wanting to describe the practice, our aim is to develop apt conceptualizations of the complex of relevant issues. The data that we have collected up until now include interviews and media materials. The latter contain all the articles mentioning dumpster diving published in Finland in Alma Media corporation-owned newspapers between 1990 and 2014 (44 articles in total); documentary films on dumpster diving; and social media data.² The materials that we have gathered thus far provide a rich background understanding of the phenomenon and its recent history in Finland and elsewhere, especially in Europe. One striking feature of the data is how vividly the practices of dumpster diving are portrayed. These research materials are useful for our present methodological aims which are twofold: we *describe* the practices of dumpster diving as they come forth in the interviews conducted thus far and we also *conceptualize* these practices from the point of view of valuation studies. For these purposes, we have gone through the interview materials by way of thematic coding, highlighting the core findings relevant for our present aims. Especially, we have looked for narratives that detail the practical action and thus also provide us with important material that can be used in conceptualization.

We interviewed 14 people who had been actively engaged in the practice of voluntary dumpster diving for food, plus we conducted one interview with a shopkeeper. At the time of the interviews, the informants were between 23 and 43 years of age, but only four were older than 34. Eight were women, and six were male. The informants were recruited through various channels. First connections have typically been made through acquaintances who mentioned that they themselves or their friends dumpster dive, or have previously done so. Then, others were found through snowballing. New contacts have been gained not only through those already interviewed, but also via our conversations with students and colleagues who have practiced dumpster diving themselves or who know others who have done so. We met with these people in southern Finland, in the cities of Helsinki, Tampere, and Turku, between 2012 and 2017. However, some of the activities and experiences recounted by the interviewees took place either in other, smaller towns in Finland or abroad, elsewhere in

² Alma Media is a media and service company focused on publishing, printing, and distributing as well as on providing digital services mostly in Finland but also in Sweden, the Baltic countries, and Eastern Central Europe. We have chosen the corporation's newspapers for reasons of access and their wide coverage of major regional newspapers in Finland.

Europe. And although most of our interviewees are active dumpster divers today, two informants talked about activities that took place in the past because they did not feel that they could practice dumpster diving given their current life situations.

Despite the fact that dumpster diving can seem very radical from the point of view of other consumers' daily lives, it is noteworthy that our informants are, on the whole, rather middle-class in terms of their appearances and lifestyles. While they do not present a homogenous group,³ most are relatively highly educated professionals, with university degrees or other tertiary education. They are also privileged in that they practice dumpster diving voluntarily, which distinguishes them from the marginalized people who scrounge out of necessity. Our informants could afford to buy their food, but they chose to scavenge mainly for ideological reasons: they are critical of overconsumption, the ethos of disposal, and the wasting of resources in capitalist production.

Virtual and actual value: How does food waste become desirable?

One of the key points we want to make in this article is that what emerges from attending the practices of dumpster diving is an understanding of value as a *pragmatic* matter. Instead of residing inherently in the object or being simply a product of a subjective judgment, value is created and enacted in practical relations, as a result of valuation. Of course, approaches treating the emergence of value as related to practices have recently become commonplace in the field of valuation studies (Fourcade 2011; Lamont 2012; Muniesa 2012; Helgesson and Muniesa 2013). Such approaches have often found their key inspiration in John Dewey's *Theory of Valuation* (1939). However, in this article, we draw our understanding of valuation as a practice from another author, the German sociologist and philosopher Georg Simmel, who was a contemporary of Dewey. In the context of the present paper, there is not sufficient space for systematically studying the similarities and differences between Dewey's and Simmel's conceptions of value and valuation. In drawing on Simmel, for us the point is not so much to say, for instance, that Simmel would offer a significantly 'better' understanding related to these concepts than does Dewey. Rather, Simmel allows us to make similar kinds of points that have recently been made by relying on Dewey's writings. In this way we underline the possibility of drawing on multiple theoretical sources and thereby enriching our understanding of valuation. In addition and perhaps more importantly for our purposes, as we will show, we find

³ See also Alex V. Barnard (2016b: 1019), who observes the New York City based freegan dumpster divers studied by him to be 'ideologically heterogeneous'.

Simmel's concept of *desire*, which is a notion that is not as central for Dewey, especially useful for us in this context.

For Simmel, values are integral to what it is to be human. It is a psychological necessity that human life runs in 'experiencing and judging values' (Simmel 2004 [1900/07]: 60). Without valuations, reality would lack all sense and significance (*Sinn*). According to the approach Simmel develops in *The Philosophy of Money* (2004 [1900/07]), nothing is valuable in itself, but neither can value be understood as simply a projection onto the world that is assumed to be passive and indifferent to human action. Instead of starting from either the subjective or the objective pole as pre-constituted, Simmel starts in the middle, in the act of valuation. He proposes that value 'appears at the same time and in the same process of differentiation as the desiring Ego and as its correlate' (ibid.: 68). In other words, according to him, the distinction between what is 'objective' and 'subjective' is *generated* in and by the act of valuation. It is through valuation that a subject comes to understand itself as separate from an object. Thus, Simmel detects a dynamic *in-between* through which something that we call 'objective' and 'subjective' can emerge.

Interestingly, Simmel sees the concept of value as corresponding to the concept of *desire*. He maintains that value and desire are one another's reverse sides. In other words, the relationship between a subject and an object is the same whether one says that a subject 'desires' or that an object has 'value'. The only difference lies in the perspective. Once a relationship of valuation is constituted, it can be seen either from the point of view of the subject or the object. The act of valuation simultaneously implies the emergence of the *distance*, or the space in between, that separates us from the objects of our desire. This distance, then, is also the constitutive element of desire and value. According to Simmel, we desire objects only insofar as and as long as they are not in our immediate use and enjoyment (ibid.: 66). We see as valuable those things that we must struggle to obtain. Therefore, to value something is to assess the distance between oneself and the thing to be enjoyed, and to assess the obstacles one must face when covering the distance. To sum up, Simmel leads us to think about 'value' and 'desire' as names given to the practical in-between space that helps to constitute the subject and the object as separate. It is this in-between space that also makes present the desired and valued object as something that is *not* completely under the subject's control.

How is the Simmelian idea of valuation applicable to waste, then? Evidently, if positive valuation is about apprehending and attempting to overcome a distance, ultimately fuse the one who desires and the object of desire, the production of waste is rather about *increasing the distance* between oneself and what is thrown away, thus resulting in heterogeneity instead of homogeneity. It is to exclude and abandon, to separate the self from what is considered not to be a part of the self.

Indeed, the etymology of the term ‘object’, with the Latin root *ob-iacere*, indicates that objectification has to do with something being thrown before one’s mind or senses. Thereby, one is tempted to claim that the object being thrown away is also the primordial object.

Hence, much like valuation, *de-valuation* is a practical matter. This conclusion is in accordance with the key premise of social scientific research on waste, which often draws inspiration from Mary Douglas’s *Purity and Danger* (1966): just as value does not reside in objects themselves, nothing is rubbish inherently and in essence. On the contrary, things become rubbish depending on how they are perceived and valued by human subjects. Whereas Simmel does not overtly discuss rubbish in *The Philosophy of Money*, Michael Thompson considers the creation and destruction of value very explicitly in his book *Rubbish Theory* (1979). According to Thompson, objects do not simply vanish and cease to be once they have lost their value to us. Rather, they persist even though we may no longer have any use for them. He refers to such objects with the term ‘rubbish’. For him, rubbish presents the zero point of value. It forms the third category of objects between transient objects (which have a limited life span and the value of which decreases over time) and durable objects (which are more permanent and the value of which tends to increase over time).

While we have referenced in the Introduction more recent scholarship within the field of discard studies relating to the ambiguity of waste and valuation, we feel that it is especially by elaborating how our approach departs from Thompson’s that we are best able to outline our own take. First, whereas Thompson has his eye principally on the social control of value and on the creation of durables, in our study rediscovered objects have an afterlife quite different from that of the durable items examined by Thompson. Our informants most often recover the value of discarded objects literally to *consume* them, that is, to finish them off. In their case, valuing thus leads to destruction (see also Heuts and Mol 2013).

Second, we do not treat rubbish or waste as the negation or ‘the degree zero of value’, as Thompson does, or as ‘the opposite of value’ (cf. Frow 2003: 25). Rather, our research on dumpster diving shows that when extracted appropriately, waste itself may turn out to have a capacity for value (see also e.g. Gutberlet 2008; Lepawsky and McNabb 2010; Gregson and Crang 2015; Carenzo 2016a, 2016b; Abrahamsson 2019; and other contributions to this Special Issue). Even when waste is unwanted by some, discarded items may be reassessed and re-categorized as usable and valuable by others. This is in accordance with Simmel’s theory of value, which when applied to the case of waste, leads one to consider the ‘wasteness’ of waste not as a question of either/or. Rather, it has to do with the dynamics of distance and proximity that involves the affect of desire; thus, instead of not having value at all, waste items can have negative value for

some. That is, these people can desire to have more distance between themselves and waste items, but still, for dumpster divers, these waste items may possess value.

Third, unlike Thompson, we pay close attention to matter and the world of materials (see also e.g. Gille 2010; Hird 2012). Dealing with rubbish means dealing with heaps and piles of stuff that rots, tarnishes, grows mouldy, decomposes, and may be sticky and smelly. Dumpster divers not only intervene in the various trajectories of waste and processes of decay, but also sort things out, extract them, and process them. Thus, for us, studying waste and dumpster diving has to do with *becoming*, that is, with the historicity of matter.

By emphasizing that the materials that make up waste are heterogeneous, and that waste is not simply the opposite of value, we put a finger on something that seems to be a common problem for Douglas and Thompson, as well as many others who emphasize the pragmatics of categorization, including potentially Simmel as well. Their work is important in establishing the in-between as the sphere of valuation and to achieve this, they busily dismantle claims that things have inherent or substantive value. The cost of this move, however, is that they easily turn a blind eye to the positivity of the stuff desired or devalued. Subsequently, it remains unclear what in the waste matter is the *given* that allows it to become either waste or food. In the process of making the discarded foodstuffs edible, the materials are not merely inert and passive matter. Their morphogenetic capacities are not imposed from the outside. Rather, the materials themselves have a say in their becoming—in what may and may not come out of them (see DeLanda 2005; Hawkins 2017: 56).

So what is given in the waste matter? We feel that in order to begin to answer this question, it is useful to follow the dumpster divers to understand how they *generate value*. This practice can be portrayed as a sort of ‘alchemy [...] of turning trash into treasure’, as Jeff Ferrell (2005: 25) describes scrounging. In waste items, the dumpster divers see and actualize something that is neglected or overlooked by others. In contrast to the rest of the population, they do not share the consumer ethos that only the best quality suffices. For them, foodstuffs do not need to be presented in shiny and inviting packages. Nevertheless, the goods that they rescue from the dumpsters do not look much like waste at all and are perfectly edible. And there is lots of the stuff, too. Our informants tell us that often there is much more food available in the trash bins than they can take home with them and make good use of. In addition to bananas and white bread, there are plenty of vegetables, yoghurt, cheese, cakes, and sometimes even chocolate, not to mention ice cream, the odd tenderloin, or vacuum packed salmon. Only dry foodstuffs, such as pasta and flour, are harder to find, and cooking oil is almost impossible.

When making their rounds across the urban streetscape to make discoveries, dumpster divers approach discarded materials as *perhaps* containing more value, or a different kind of value, than what shopkeepers and other consumers see in them: the practice is all about seeing uncertain, un-actualized value in waste and *making* something out of waste. There are two reasons for emphasizing the words ‘perhaps’ and ‘making’ here. First, when one follows the minute gestures with which dumpster divers evaluate items, it becomes clear that they cannot be certain that the materials they encounter are eatable as well as edible, and worth taking home. Perhaps some of them are. Perhaps others are not. In order to find out, dumpster divers must use all their senses to assess and evaluate the condition of the product. Indeed, when leaving for a dumpster diving tour, one can never be quite certain whether one will find something edible and, if so, precisely what this will be (although white bread and bananas are a sound bet). This stands in stark contrast to mundane shopping that is structured by the expectation that one will get exactly those products one is looking for, and one knows exactly where and when to get them. Nothing in this process is likely to cause a surprise; in principle there is no ‘perhaps’ involved.⁴

Second, there would be no value in rubbish if that value was not generated and *made*. As will be seen in the following sections, there are many stages in which food materials are trialed before they finally end up on the plate as edible things. A range of activities is involved in extracting the good nutritional value or culinary pleasure out of what the shopkeepers and other consumers consider as only waste. However, before going into more detail regarding the techniques and skills involved in dumpster diving as a valuing practice, let us still slow down our analysis slightly to conceptualize clearly what is given in waste.

One may be tempted to say that dumpster divers see possibilities or capacity where others do not. While this idea rightly draws attention to the contingency involved, it also leads the analysis astray in terms of bypassing the practical side of dumpster diving. It is as if the possibilities lay dormant in waste and one only had to spot and discover these possibilities and give them reality, as it were, in order to extract the edible mass from the non-edible mass, the assumption here being that nothing in the item itself changes during the manoeuvre.

⁴ Of course, this is a limited description of factual shopping practices in which the element of surprise is constantly present, both as something with which the shopkeeper and the brand manager try to seduce the customer and in the form of the ‘impulse buy’, which for the customer, can be the source of a pleasant thrill. However, the possibility of such a thrill depends on the confidence one has that the shopping environment will provide the things that one had originally come to look for; impulse buys are only an extra layer added to this basic expectation. In contrast, in the case of dumpster diving the sense of uncertainty is constitutive and primordial.

Instead of such vocabulary, we draw from Gilles Deleuze's elaborations on Henri Bergson's notion of the *virtual* (Deleuze 1966, 1968) to articulate how that which is given as trash quite literally must be *transformed* into treasure. Deleuze's pair of terms, the 'virtual' and the 'actual', is a way of conceptualizing change and dynamism in terms of the creation of difference. Deleuze elaborates on the notion of the virtual by distinguishing it from the 'possible'. Whereas the possible is the opposite of the real, virtuality is, according to Deleuze, real through and through; it lacks nothing. According to Deleuze, the actualization of the virtual is always creative. Instead of merely making real something possible by adding existence to it, it is an act of invention. To actualize something thus means that one *creates* something new out of what is present in the thing in a virtual manner. Deleuze insists that things are never only actual. Rather, they have a virtual side to them as well. The virtual in a thing is related to lines of becoming that are not yet actualized (and, if so happens, might as well never become actualized), and the differentiation that it is capable of.

For us, Deleuze's conception is helpful in stressing the dynamics of waste. If we want to understand the potential value of waste, we must go beyond its actual elements. The transformation from trash to treasure depends on waste having a virtual dimension, a capacity to be enacted in various actualities as edibles. The potential of the materials to become edible is folded as virtuality. What is more, we consider the idea of the actualization of the virtual also to be helpful in underlining the practical side of valuation. The refused materials placed behind a supermarket will not become actualized as food again without the concrete practices of valuation through which these items are first tried out and then *made* edible by being processed and prepared into a meal. The practices thus create difference. It is only because the found items have the prospect of perhaps being edible and delicious that they are worth all the trouble that goes into diving into and sorting things out in waste containers, transporting the catch home, cleaning it, preserving it, and cooking it.

All in all, the shift from the virtual to the actual is a very different way of conceptualizing the potential of discarded foodstuffs to become edible as compared to seeing it as residing statically in the materials. To depict the potential as intrinsic to the items would be to ignore completely the concrete work of dumpster divers, which is necessary in ensuring that something valuable is generated from the items found. Dumpster divers do not simply go about recognizing some presumably static possibilities in items waiting to be rediscovered in waste management areas. Rather, the practice of valuation implies making something *new* out of what is given, allowing something novel to emerge, something that is not yet there in an actual form. The capacities and the potential value of the items must be enacted via specific practices and arrangements. This is the virtual side of food

waste: some parts of the material have virtually what it takes to the material to be actualizable as food, but not all of it has this property. What we want to emphasize with this terminology is the creative and practical side of dumpster diving as an act of valuation. The in-between space detected by Simmel is the practical sphere of value/desire, where the virtualities of the discarded foodstuffs are (re)assessed and where these foodstuffs are allowed and then made to become something else, something valuable and desirable.

Actualizing value: the scavenger gaze, dumpster diving skills, and the proper gear

How do dumpster divers concretely go about actualizing value in the foodstuffs they find in waste containers? In this section we will investigate the practices of valuation by discussing the modes of perception, skills, and tools demanded by the activity.

To begin with, in order to have any chance of finding things to eat among waste, one needs a special *orientation* to the surroundings. Our informants told us that, over time, one comes to develop a particular manner of perceiving the townscape with the aim of finding abundant containers. By drawing on the notion of the ‘tourist gaze’, as coined by John Urry (1990), we call this perceptual orientation the *scavenger gaze*. Both gazes imply an increased sensitivity and attention to the townscape and its visual elements. Similarly to the tourist, the dumpster diver observes the features of townscape as signs standing for something else. However, while the tourist craves experiences and sensuous pleasure, the scavenger scans the urban environment to find a good catch.

Importantly, however, the valuation of the urban environment and discarded matter in dumpster diving not only involves the gaze but other senses as well. It mixes cognitive evaluation with bodily operations.⁵ This is evident for example in the quality control that the dumpster divers perform on site. This involves not only deciphering the information provided by the texts and best-by dates on packages or the material conditions of objects, but also sensuous evaluation, using the senses as epistemic devices to judge whether a product is still usable or has gone off. One inspects the items by eye, feels them, smells them, and may even taste them there by the containers, though more often than not one takes a bite only when the food has been cleansed and put on the plate. Even the sense of hearing is important, although mostly to allow the dumpster diver to stay alert to the potentiality of anyone approaching and interrupting the action.

⁵ Soile Veijola and Eeva Jokinen (1994) aptly criticize the notion of the tourist gaze as focusing too heavily on the visual dimension and ignoring the *body*; according to them it is not just the gaze that is engaged in touristic activities but the body as well.

Analogously to the tourist gaze, the scavenger gaze presents us a mirror, as it were, for making sense of the 'normal' ways of being in and experiencing the townscape, with which it is contrasted. However, whereas the tourist gaze involves a departure from everyday surroundings, a limited break with the established routines and practices of everyday life, according to our interviewees dumpster diving can dramatically change the everyday ways of looking at the townscape, as well as being in and moving across and around it. It also becomes part of the practitioners' mundane, habitual life. Similarly, when observing dumpster divers in New York City, Sharon Cornelissen (2016) observed that their ways of seeing and orientations in the urban space acquire a commonsensical character, rather than representing disparate elements of a cultural repertoire. Alex V. Barnard (2016b), too, suggests that for freegans living in New York City, navigating its streets and combing the curbs in search of useful waste are something like 'second nature'. Thus, the scavenger gaze does not primarily stand in contrast with the mundane. Instead, it is different from others' orientation to the urban environment. It is also obvious that the scavenger gaze ultimately maps the city quite differently than the tourist gaze: instead of focusing on spectacular sights, it explores the barely visible city, paying attention to the backyards, smutty waste containers, and no-go areas that usually remain out of sight and are not displayed in postcards, travel guides, glossy books, and tourist snapshots. From the point of view of our general argument, it is significant that the scavenger gaze is also a way of *valuing* the urban environment. Whereas the tourist examines the cityscape for sites to visit and photograph, the dumpster diver looks for places that could be hiding a good catch.

For someone equipped with the scavenger gaze, the cityscape becomes an urban hunting ground. Or, to be more exact, the scavenger gaze is not a property of people, but a relation of the subject and one's environment, of a sensory medium and a sensitive world. It is a particular way of engaging with the urban environment. This means that it is also partly up to the cityscape to attribute the scavenger gaze to the subject by rendering the self alert and making it sensitive to differences. To acquire the scavenger gaze and inhabit a cityscape hiding plenty of good catches, one must 'learn[...] to be affected' (Latour 2004: 206) by the urban environment. A good hunter develops an alertness to opportunities whenever they present themselves. In the same way, becoming a skilful dumpster diver implies that one learns to know the environment and its material flows, including the changes in the spatio-temporal structure of the townscape during the day. Hence, correct timing is part of the dumpster diver's craft. One must hit the supermarkets' or grocery stores' bins at the right moment. Usually, dumpster divers make their rounds after closing time, when night falls, taking advantage of

darkness. This is to avoid receiving attention. Few want to be caught digging through the leftovers of others. What is more, encountering supermarket clerks would expose dumpster divers, and thus they might not be able to continue their practice on the premises in the future. Supermarket and store managers tend not to prefer that people scrounge around their waste. In addition, the after-closing hours are also the most convenient time to go diving, because the bins are typically filled. Therefore, in terms of circadian rhythm, dumpster diving can be difficult for people with small children and regular nine-to-five jobs because one must stay up late not only to obtain the food after supermarkets' closing times, but one also needs to process the catch afterwards at home.

In addition to knowing the best time to go scrounging, dumpster diving also requires spatial knowledge regarding where one can find a good catch. Our informants told us that to some extent this information is shared within the community. As Aaro, a 32-year-old male student who lives together with five friends told us, sharing the information is an expression of solidarity:

Of course I reveal [the right places] to everybody I know to dumpster dive because they are all in the same situation as I am, with likely no other sources of income than student allowance or social benefits; if one for example, lives on a disability pension or something like that, it would be awful if I kept it all to myself.

It is not, however, that the information circulates freely. On the contrary, one chooses quite carefully the persons with whom one shares it. For instance, in the Finnish Facebook group *Dyykkaus* (literally, 'Diving')—which at the point of this writing, in June 2017, had over 5,200 members—people who have moved write frequently on the wall to ask for tips regarding places to dive in their new hometowns, but these queries always remain unanswered publicly. In fact, it is against the rules of the group to share this information otherwise than via private messages. It is feared that if managers or staff members realize that people rummage through the shops' containers, stores and supermarkets may attempt to implement measures to prevent dumpster diving. In Finland supermarkets increasingly either lock up their dumpsters or house them inside sheds that have locks.

Obviously, it is not enough to say that a crafty dumpster diver must have the right orientation, if by that word one refers only to an 'attitude'. Rather, talking about the scavenger gaze, for us, implies both cognitive, bodily, and prosthetic aspects. Indeed, the cognitive and hands-on valuation practice of scavenging also relies heavily on

various objects and tools.⁶ Finding enough cast-off bounty to live on it and also managing the excess one finds, requires the use of proper gear including gloves; thick-soled footwear such as hiking shoes because the area around containers may be littered with glass; durable clothing that is not so distinctive as to raise unwanted attention but can get a bit soiled (though our interviewees reported that dumpster diving is a lot cleaner than people seem to think it is; unless one digs through meat or fish, one can simply wear regular clothes); and a backpack, for instance, for collecting and transporting the catch. Plastic bags may also come in handy. If some of the food items are slimy, they can be placed in plastic bags so that they will not soil the rest of the catch. Also, a flashlight or a forehead lamp is useful, though inside a well-lit shed one may do without. Additionally, if the site is not close to home, a dumpster diver will also have to take into consideration the means of transport, be it a bike, car, or bus. All these tools are employed in the concrete work of valuing and sorting out what is potentially edible and what is not. Without such technological prostheses, the valuation practice would be difficult.

For our informants the fundamental problem with regard to food is not scarcity but excess. A successful hunt will produce an overflow of edibles. And yet, because the specific catch produced by a hunting trip cannot be predicted, one core skill for a dumpster diver is to know how to handle surplus and use it to fend off the potential for scarcity. This sets requirements for kitchen facilities and utensils, too, as after one has arrived home another round of quality control needs to be performed. One must have enough space to deal with the materials, pick what is good, clean it, peel it, cook it, and preserve it. An especially useful device in dealing with an abundance of food is the freezer. The freezer is a means with which to defeat the forces of decay and decomposition, yet it is worth noting that none of the individual tools mentioned seems to be *essential* for dumpster diving. Rather, while *some* tools are inevitably required, the totality of the equipment used can vary, and also new prosthetic parts of practical valuation can become core instruments for the activity. For example, one of our informants—Milla, a female doctoral student in her late twenties—discussed the significance of the blender in these terms. Because of the constant availability of cast-off fruit, especially bananas and lemons but often also kinds that the interviewee describes as ‘exotic’, a blender is handy for turning an abundance of slightly old fruit into smoothies. The point here is that the valuation of lemon, especially, becomes different because of the usage of the blender, which thus becomes, for Milla, an essential tool for the activity.

⁶ The literature on the techniques of dumpster diving includes, for instance, the dumpster diving manual by John Hoffman 1993; for more academic points of view, see Ferrell 2005; Barnard 2016a.

In sum, the valuation of food waste in dumpster diving involves three intimately intertwined dimensions. First, there is the *orientation* to and *relation* with the urban environment we called the scavenger gaze. Second, the scavenger gaze is not separate from the various *skills* involved in dumpster diving or from the multisensory practical expertise that comes with the craft. Finally, third, one could not begin to understand these bodily skills unless one understood how deeply they are dependent on a range of *tools* and technologies that only make the valuation activity involved in dumpster diving possible. Importantly, then, the valuations that our informants perform are not merely cognitive operations concerned with *knowing* what can be eaten but also multisensory, distributed activities that are dependent on various non-human or more-than-human objects and materials, enact value, and perform the foodstuffs as edible. The techniques and tools used in recovering food are all means of evaluating and sorting the items that may have an affordance of value from those that do not. All of this has repercussions in terms of the previous section's Simmelian examination of value. Namely, the tripartite analyses of orientation, skills and tools suggest that the core of valuation, the *in-between space*, does not bluntly refer to just one sphere of valuation. Rather, in practice valuation consists of a dynamic interplay between activities in multiple scales and modes.

Doing good—and undoing the stigma of scrounging

Scavenging the discarded materials of others tends to be associated with marginalized people. In the international news media, for example, scavenging is often perceived as an index of global inequality. The salvaging of waste is portrayed as something done out of necessity and desperation as a result of extreme poverty (Reno 2009: 32). It also bears a stigma: it is regarded as dirty and degrading and as marked by indignity and shame. In his article examining workers at a large Michigan landfill practicing scavenging, Joshua Reno (2009: 40) observes that it is as if the workers were contaminated by waste, so much so that they have exchanged properties with the materials with which they work and, in a sense, 'become waste themselves—worthless and without potential'. To avoid some of this contamination, the landfill workers, according to Reno, engage in various rituals of purification, such as throwing out their work gloves, washing their hands and arms, changing their uniforms and boots at the end of the shift, and keeping them at work in the locker room instead of taking them home. Nevertheless, the smell simply does not wear away, and the workers' partners and children occasionally complain of landfill odours and recoil in their presence (ibid.: 40).

Our informants, too, are fully aware of the disgust that people tend to feel when in contact with rubbish and the anxiety that dumpster

diving therefore creates. Milla, who started dumpster diving when she was 16 years old, talks about the repulsion her parents felt when she brought scavenged food home back then: ‘They yelled at me and said that this food would not be eaten, and they were ready to throw it away immediately.’ Her mother also carefully placed the foodstuffs recovered by Milla from waste containers in isolation in the fridge to prevent them from mixing with their purchased groceries. Further, Tommi, a 35-year-old male academic with two children, explains that while he himself does not mind the dirtiness, because he has had a fascination for finding things and also has practiced scavenging in some form or another as long as he can remember, people in general do not feel this way. On the contrary, he feels that when they think of dumpster diving, ‘there is a genuine unpleasantness to it that people have at the back of their minds, precisely the dirtiness associated with rubbish’. According to Tommi, frequenting dumpsters is also stigmatizing; people assume that ‘it is [only] the outcasts of society who hang around there’.

Nevertheless, our informants tell us that it is very rare that one encounters marginalized people, such as homeless alcoholics, at waste containers in Finland. ‘Most often you bump into mates from your circle of friends who happen to live nearby the place where you go diving’, Aaro mentions. Also, voluntary dumpster divers actively reject the indignity and negative stigma associated with digging in other people’s garbage. Thus, while they re-value waste matter they also *trans-value the value of the practice itself*.

For one thing, our informants see dumpster diving as profitable. It is not their last resort, but they choose to do it because it benefits them and works to their advantage; if one can obtain food for free, then why not do it. Tommi says that occasionally he calculates how much money he has saved by diving: ‘Sometimes when you assess the worth of what you have found on a one-hour dive, for example, it sums up to over a hundred euros easily.’ In a similar vein, a freegan⁷ interviewed for the *Turun Sanomat* newspaper stated that dumpster diving enabled him and his friends to have a lifestyle that would otherwise be unattainable. ‘We eat like kings’, he bragged, and continued as follows: ‘Judging solely by income I belong to the section of the population who earn the least, I mean, to the very bottom. But we get by really

⁷ The term ‘freegan’ is a combination of the words ‘free’ and ‘vegan’. Only few of our informants identify themselves as freegans. The main reason for this is that although they, like freegans, are systematic in seeing dumpster diving as an ethical and political choice and voluntary practice, among our informants the kind of rigid stance towards animal products involved in some definitions of freeganism—i.e., an absolute refusal to eat any animal products, not only meat but also dairy products such as cheese—is rare. In addition, freeganism, as described by Barnard (2016a), can be related to an endeavor to form an organized social movement. For our interviewees, by contrast, dumpster diving is more of a personal matter and represents a form of less visible resistance.

well. I really don't need much money' (*Turun Sanomat* Sept 14, 2014). Aaro, too, says that thanks to dumpster diving he and his flatmates are able to live in abundance: 'It is great when you don't have to worry about whether you can afford to eat. We always have salad, and there are always fruits and veggies. It is so fantastic. For a student that is magnificent.' He says that they buy basically nothing but dried foods such as macaroni and rice; all the other foodstuffs they get from the dumpster. Notably, there is plenty of bread:

In our commune we have on the kitchen hood a post-it note that reads 'Never buy bread'. You know that things are really bad when you reach the point that you have to buy bread from a store (laughs) because you can always find bread in basically every dumpster.

Dumpster diving also enables one to work less and spend more time in the pursuit of more pleasant tasks (see also Hoffman 1993: 5). One of our interviewees, Jaakko, says that to him, dumpster diving 'makes possible the fact that I do not have to work so much. In any case you do not spend much money; it is exactly because you can dive that [...] I think we manage with a ridiculously small sum of money'. By 'we' he means himself and his partner Alisa, who adds the following:

Yeah, our household income is smaller than it would be if we lived on benefits. [...] I mean that, for us, social welfare which people have complained of being too small—we would probably be able to go on a holiday to the Caribbean with that sort of money.

Nevertheless, profitability is far from the only positive value our informants attach to dumpster diving. They probably would not have started to dumpster dive had they not thought about it as a morally and politically inviting activity. All the interviewees see dumpster diving as an ecological practice that saves nature and provides resistance to the ethos of disposability. Tommi, for instance, speaks of dumpster diving as a form of 'counter-politics' and Milla states that, for her, dumpster diving 'is, in general, part of a criticism of capitalism'. She remarks that 'one is terrified by how many good products go to waste—it is incomprehensible. There is so much good food there, and one could fill so many stomachs with it'. Accordingly, instead of feeling ashamed and humiliated, our informants take pride in what they do. Noora, a thirty-something female university teacher with two children, says half-jokingly, with a smile on her face, that she and her friends sometimes talk about dumpster diving as a kind of 'informal waste management': while waste management firms charge money for collecting waste, dumpster divers do it for free. Therefore, store managers should in fact be grateful to dumpster divers instead of trying to prevent them from scavenging, she explains, because diving

reduces the amount of waste that the supermarkets and stores produce and thereby their expenses as well.

Feeding people with this food instead of letting it go to waste is, for our informants, also a way of showing respect for the food. They perceive disposal as revealing a lack of respect for the commodity and for the life and labor that have gone into producing it. The fact that things end up in dumpsters is a sign of improper use because disposal literally wastes and neglects the many kinds of values that could be generated via the foodstuffs. Dumpster divers, by contrast, as we have already suggested, actualize the capabilities of these foodstuffs by not only finding and eating them, but also by using them as gifts, for example. They feel that they make the best use of the items that others ignore or are simply unaware of.

All in all, while our informants certainly appreciate a good catch, for them dumpster diving is thus not merely a means of finding food for free. They also value the practice in itself. They see it as both economically profitable and eco-friendly. The latter point is intertwined with morals, with doing the right thing, 'living in the city in an ecologically sustainable way', as the *Aamulehti* newspaper described the thoughts of a female student practicing dumpster diving (*Aamulehti*, 29 Nov, 2002).

Furthermore, dumpster diving has also to do with pleasure. As Antti, a thirty-something male who says he has practiced dumpster diving for a couple of years in Finland and the Nordic countries, sums it up: '[T]here's the economic profit, the fact that one recycles, that it is eco-friendly, and on top of it all it is also fun.' For our informants, dumpster diving is, to some extent, sociable, driven by the pleasure of being with others for the sake of being with them (cf. Simmel 2001 [1911]: 178). It is something that one does collectively, with others. For example, Salla, a 29-year-old female student in fashion design, says that especially in the past, dumpster diving was, for her, also 'a way of spending time with your friends'. Noora mentions that she practically never goes diving alone. Rather, she always goes in the company of friends or with her partner. Alina has occasionally done it alone, but she says that 'it's not nearly as fun'.

This different relationship to waste also involves valuing others and the surrounding society in a different way. Dumpster divers not only assess their own conduct and lives according to certain criteria but also assess the life of others. By valuing waste differently, they establish alternative measures of goodness and aspire to live otherwise than the majority. The ecologically sustainable mode of life enables one, at least in one's own view, to assume one's rightful position in society. Salla, for example, laments that 'we have somehow got used to this ridiculous overabundance' and states that it is better to keep matter in circulation rather than waste it. The point is not that dumpster divers would be able to live without throwing anything away. Rather, their

practices reveal that there is nothing inevitable about the habits of exclusion and the elimination of waste that characterize the contemporary western form of life.

Perhaps the category of 'waste' is an unavoidable part of the human condition because *some* forms of eliminating (food) waste seem inevitable. However, dumpster divers are able to problematize when and how we exclude materials and items, and precisely what we eliminate and why we do so. Ultimately, their activity reveals that this is not only a question of individual or even group choices but rather that our waste infrastructures lead us toward unethical everyday practices—unethical in the sense of leading us to forget to problematize our relationships to waste (Hawkins 2006).

Ultimately, dumpster diving entails a practical valuation of an entire mode of life. Its critical relationship to wasting and to the ethos of disposability entails a critique of how we live today. It is not only about passing judgment but also about thinking, acting, and being otherwise, living differently from the majority. Barnard's extensive study *Freegans: Diving into the Wealth of Food Waste in America* (2016a) provides a detailed analysis of how the freegan social movement in New York is striving to create a way of life that is conspicuously critical not only of the way the majority lives but, even more importantly, of the food (infra-)structures that configure this way of living. Barnard is also very clear about how and why this aim on the part of the freegans is not easy to accomplish in practice.

In Simmelian terms, valuing an entire form of life requires the creation of an in-between space that enables one to view the contemporary form of life from a distance. It is this critical distance that allows one to question what is regarded by the majority as having value and what is regarded as undesirable. Simultaneously, thanks to this distance, one can see oneself as a subject detached from a way of life that, in itself, has come to be perceived as an object of value judgements. It is easy to see dumpster diving as a practical actualization of a critical attitude toward collective wastefulness. However, listening to our informants, it appears that in addition, the practice itself further nuances this distancing and the valuating activity. In other words, there is a looping effect: the more one does things differently than other consumers and the more encounters (directed by the scavenger gaze) one has with the retail environment, the more manifold become the concrete contexts in which valuation can take place—not only the modes of valuation but also the potential ways of being critical of the contemporary way of life, as manifested in its concrete details. Thus, dumpster divers are not simply critical of the contemporary way of life in the whole. Rather, this comprehensive attitude is nuanced because they value the most various things related to their practice: they value access to waste areas, the condition in which the discarded foodstuffs are obtainable, the range of items

available, the economic value of the hunt, whether one has fun with one's fellow-gleaners, and the modes of storing and preparing food, for example. On the whole, then, as a voluntary practice dumpster diving is essentially about valuing. However, insofar as it is about valuation, it is about *many modes* of valuation.

Conclusion

How is voluntary dumpster diving intertwined with the question of value? What can dumpster diving teach us about valuation more generally? If one begins an analysis by examining *what* is valued in the practice, it seems to concern, above all, whether the items found in the waste containers are edible or not. Yet, as we have seen, there are also a number of other elements that our informants value in the practice of dumpster diving. In addition to assessing the urban environment in terms of the prospect of extracting nutritional value or culinary pleasure dumpster divers also value the practice itself because it enables them to live differently in the midst of consumer capitalism.

However, in this article we studied not only *what* is valued in dumpster diving, but also, importantly, *how* valuation takes place in practice. First, valuation is revealed as dynamic: value does not lie inherently in the discarded object, just waiting to be realized, nor is it merely a matter of subjective cognitive assessment. Instead, our informants have a hands-on relationship to their objects of valuation, and they enact value in embodied practices. For them, the judgment regarding whether something can or cannot be eaten is not a separate activity but is, rather, intertwined with other activities. In dumpster diving, the practices of moving in a townscape, diving into waste containers, as well as sorting, picking up, transporting, washing, peeling, freezing, and cooking, for example, are integral to valuation.

Second, the fact that valuation is inextricably entangled with practices that are not explicitly about value also means that valuation is not only about *knowing* what can be eaten but also about *making* things good to eat (see also Heuts and Mol 2013). For us, dumpster diving thus entails an important lesson about the *creativity* involved in valuation. We have thematized that creativity with the help of the conceptual pair of the actual and the virtual, as developed by Deleuze. To actualize discarded food as good to eat means that one creates something new out of what is given, something that is not actually yet there in the discards.

The actual–virtual axis also relates to our third point. Because the food waste found in the containers is not yet actual edible food, valuation is bound to remain more or less uncertain. It lacks fixed variables. The operations involved in performing the recovered food waste as edible do not offer control over value, because one can never be absolutely certain that the items one finds are good to eat and

worth taking home. Instead of fitting standards, the waste matter spills over. It remains beyond and in excess of classifications.

To sum up, an important result of our study is that instead of there being only one or two forms of value relevant in dumpster diving—for example, use value and exchange value—a multiplicity of forms of valuing are at play in our data. Thus, in this article we have *mapped* these modes of valuation; we have shown that they coexist and are interlinked. Indeed, it is because of the rich variety of modes of valuation that dumpster diving as a practice clarifies the unarticulated norms of the western form of life as regards food waste. The practice illuminates the presence of waste at the heart of our consumerist way of life. By studying dumpster divers and listening to their accounts of their practices, we come to understand how waste is intimately intertwined with questions of what is of value, how to live well, what we see worth striving for and keeping, and what we want to get rid of. Appreciating the pragmatic, immanent, and creative nature of valuation in dumpster diving can be useful more generally for understanding practices of valuation: it is an inventive activity that involves not simply ‘finding’ or ‘rediscovering’ value but also helps to create value. It draws on a combination of multiple skills, the usage of various techniques and tools, and a particular orientation to the world. However, thinking along the actual–virtual axis stresses that valuation is always an act of creation. We maintain that valuation can be an act of creation also in the seemingly automated, repetitive, and routinized forms of value- and waste-making implied by ‘normal’ valuation and disposal practices.

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