Welkom in Utrecht:

(un) usual business

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CIRCULAR ECONOMY:

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HOW TO COMMON

To
the unaccustomed eye,
contemporary society offers precious little encouragement
to 'be a commoner', yet the articles in this edition of *(Un)usual Business* show how opportunities to exercise our commoning muscles are within easy reach. Indeed, commoning practices are all around us if we care to look for them. We learn that commoning is happening at all scales, ranging from the household level with apartment block experiments in communal living, to the neighbourhood level with Repair Cafés, to the city level through refugee support networks that, in turn, implicate the global scale. From these fascinating explorations we might begin to imagine commoning as a 'post-capitalist politics' for our times—a politics that invites everyday participation in ethical negotiations that matter:

> What to do with the electric coffee grinder that just broke? Throw out as junk and add to the growing material waste piles that our society is drowning in? Or sit down with others to learn how to repair and reuse?
>
> How to regard those whose lives in 'their place' have been made untenable by violence and economic depression, and who are now seeking shelter in European cities like Utrecht? Ignore or turn away, citing cultural difference as a rationale for heartlessness? Or sit down together, cook and share a meal, make connections and reflect on the contingencies of history that render some birthplaces in this world 'safe' and others (hopefully temporarily) unliveable?

From the micro scale of decisions around personal consumption to the global scale of mass movements of displaced people, the idea that we make and share a commons has renewed relevance. But if we are to face the multiple challenges of climate change, economic vulnerability
and terrorism with resilience,
we must learn to become even more adept at commoning. This
means becoming more capable of taking responsibility, practicing care, sharing the benefits and allowing access to what collectively sustains us.

There is any number of things that stand in the way of this kind of capacity building. One is the fear of losing something, especially control – control over the TV channel changer, control over the reliability of the appliance, control over the look and feel of the city streets, or indeed control over the shape and trajectory of the economy. The practice of commoning takes for granted that control is only ever a chimera, that security and stasis can only ever be a momentary romance, and that when this romance becomes a reality, violence and oppression are not far away. The household where rules are non-negotiable, the nation where borders are rigidly sealed, the society in which growth of material consumption is mandatory,—these are sites where the political has been evacuated. The process of commoning puts control in its place, as something that is only grasped fleetingly within a world of change, flow and becoming other.

Another thing that stands in the way of commoning capacity building is the idea that there are simple top down solutions to complex problems that call for delicate, empathetic and grounded negotiations. Whether it is living communally and deciding how to fairly share domestic chores, or being together in a city setting and learning to appreciate differences in behaviour and belief, or facing up to our attachment to newness and trying to reuse and revalue, the negotiations involved in commoning are not necessarily easy. It is only through practice that they might become so. These articles give a glimpse of what that practice might involve. They show that the work involved in commoning brings with it a lot of joy, laughter and good feeling.

FOREWORD BY J.K. GIBSON-GRAHAM

How To Care Together
(December 2015),
Photo by
Coco Duivenvoorde

WHILE ASKING QUES-TIONS, WE WALK

By Ying Que,
(Un)usual Business

We're
proud to present
the second issue of our
(Un)usual Business journal.
In our previous issue, we introduced the concept of the commons as an idea filled with political potential to retake control of the economic means by which we reproduce our daily lives. We also explained our focus on various local commoning practices as a strategy to exchange knowledge between practitioners.

Our first issue included research about existing commoning practices in Utrecht, undertaken by the second research group *(Un)usual Business*, who worked on the project in 2014 and 2015. A third research group, which ran from October 2015 until February 2016, continued to gather research, consisting of case studies of various initiatives with a potential for commons based practice. This journal contains a selection of the case studies and research they undertook. With the launch of our new website, we will be able to improve access to all of the research *(Un)usual Business* is doing, make local commoning practices
more
visible,
and share all other findings
in an interactive way. We hope that the website - an accessible archive of local practice and theory around the commons - will at the same time activate and inspire other potential commoners to join the initiatives they find there or start commoning their lives themselves.

But we are ambitious and are always considering our next steps. What can we contribute practically to our dream of a world in which social and economic relationships are based on self-organisation, care, solidarity, and sustainability? Formulating this clear vision for *(Un)usual Business* meant that the crucial questions we dealt with this year in our own collective almost always started with the words: how to? How to common? How to share our knowledge? How to visualise social relations? How to share knowledge in a way that moves beyond description and becomes political? How to share knowledge in an accessible way?

How to, how to, how to…

THE SUBSISTENCE PERSPECTIVE

Subsistence
politics represents the concrete
political and economical empowerment of the individuals in specific places and in their communities. Their life should not be determined by some abstract, remote, political supreme power. They ought to shape it themselves, out of their own strength, together with equals.

Veronika Bennholdt-Thomsen & Maria Mies (1999:220)

Through the work of J.K. Gibson-Graham, we were able to broaden our understanding of the economy as beyond mere capitalist relations. The concept of community economies provides us with different ways to imagine, visualize and empower new stories about alternative economic structures. In May 2015, we invited Inez Aponte to Utrecht, founder of collective Growing Good Lives, who gave the lecture *Transforming the Dismal Science – Towards a New Story of Economics* and workshop *Beyond the Usual Suspects*. She emphasized how the power of words shape what we believe is (im)possible and how the old story about capitalism has outlived its time. Learning from her argument that choosing our words well can be crucial in creating a new economic and cultural paradigm, we, with many other writers, are convinced that the commons and community economies provide a strong, alternative narrative to the hegemonic understanding of current economy as being only capitalist.

Our challenge lies with our next steps. How to build sustainable relations with those we already collaborated with for our research? How to find common ground and foster the desire to connect different economic fields and initiatives together, in order to make each other stronger? How to experiment with the potential of community economies on a larger scale, a community economy with a multiplicity of communities? Is it possible to practice a subsistence politics, as Maria Mies and Veronika Bennholdt-Thomsen propose in their book *The Subsistence Perspective* (1999)?

Subsistence, according to Mies and Bennholdt-Thomsen, refers to '*everything that is connected with the immediate creation and maintenance of life, and also everything that is not arranged through the production or consumption of commodities*.' In the iceberg visualization of the economy by J.K. Gibson-Graham, we can identify subsistence production in the submerged part of the iceberg: non-capitalist, hidden, undervalued and in danger of exploitation. The aim of subsistence production is to sustain life, whereas commodity production aims to extract profit from life. The two scholars argue for a subsistence perspective when they acknowledge the need for a new social and economic perspective, in which they call the subsistence perspective a 'perspective from below'. The perspective from above, as they see it, is considered to be aimed at '*a permanent growth of goods, services and money*'. Starting with a perspective from below means to start with our daily lives and everyday politics and functions as a way to 'demystify' the perspective from above, which imagines a future on this planet only for a privileged minority, that is '*at the expense of others: nature, of other people, of women and children*.' At the same time, the subsistence perspective bases itself on the control over the means of our subsistence: control over the way we consume and produce food, over the way we care for our children or over the way in which we live.

As a research collective, in which we regard knowledge as our common resource, we see the subsistence perspective as a way to further politicise our work. It allows for us to move beyond a mere description and visualization of commoning practices, giving us the possibility to imagine a broader utopian horizon towards which we are actively taking steps by doing the research in the way we do. Collective knowledge production, amongst ourselves and with other commoners, and careful mediation between practice and theory is crucial to realising our vision about the future. While working on the visualization and accessibility of our work, we agree with Mies and Bennholdt-Thomsen that a subsistence perspective is not a blueprint: there are no step-to-step directions. And when it comes to a political strategy for subsistence, we agree when they say that '*subsistence politics is not a model, it's a process. The most important step is the first step*.'

HOW TO GET TOGETHER?

With the *How To Get Together* series, we took a first step in physically bringing together local practitioners who were organizing themselves in the economic fields of food, care and housing. During these events, they presented their initiatives, shared their knowledge, different practices, the successes of their efforts and the challenges they faced. In organizing this series, our goal was first of all to meet with other self-organized initiatives: to gather together, to talk, share our knowledge, ideas and dreams. We wanted to collectively find commonalities in different practices, both successful strategies and organisational challenges. The second goal was to broaden the understanding of and images about local alternative economic activities. An underlying motivation was also to try the waters and see if there was at all an interest amongst other commoners and their initiatives to work together in a larger subsistence network.

The three sessions in the *How To Get Together* series hosted seven self-organised initiatives: food collective VOKO Utrecht and food waste activists Taste Before You Waste presented during *How To Make Food Together*. Small-scale neighbourhood centre Ubuntu Huis, which assists people dealing with homelessness, poverty, and isolation, and the collective childcare initiative de Oase shared their work during *How To Care Together*. We closed the series with *How To Live Together*, where living group de Kasko, self-realised living project de Zonnespreng and residents of the squat Jeltje came to speak about how and why they live the way they do.

The series confirmed the inspiring variety of successful existing commoning practices all over the economic spectrum. It also proved the effectiveness of building something new: when people have a desire to change the way they live, work, and consume, their collective dedication and commitment to that change can have a big effect on a small scale. At the same time, we were confronted with a seeming impossibility to function fully autonomously from either the market or the state. Collective childcare initiative de Oase struggled to comply with the strict government standards imposed on their line of work. VOKO Utrecht, a food collective that collectively buys local products within a 35 km radius of Utrecht to distribute amongst their members, acknowledged the fact that local food producers cannot produce enough products in the region to feed the city. Spokesperson Winny pointed out that the way things are now means that people continue to be dependant on the market, because the regional food production simply cannot provide for certain things.

Inez Aponte - Workshop Beyond the Usual Suspects (May 2015), Photo by Dennis van Gaalen

How To Live Together (January 2016), Photo by Dennis van Gaalen

For sustainable change, a shift in cultural and economic paradigm is crucial - as Inez Aponte framed it, a change in the dominant story we tell ourselves about the economy. We also foresee difficulties for initiatives to look beyond their own community, due to differences in focus and the amount of labour that goes into maintaining the organisational and relational structure of their mostly volunteer-run initiatives.

These observations strengthen us in the belief that we should reflect more closely on what the next necessary steps are to build a local, alternative economic structure that can provide for our daily basic needs. Launching our new website will help us continue to explore the myriad of economic alternatives that Utrecht has to offer through research and gatherings. We believe we can contribute to a sense of togetherness and we feel that in that sense our work is definitely a form of subsistence politics. However, the possibility of a larger local community economy, that includes the different community economies we are encountering on the way, is still on the horizon.

We are taking our first steps and it is still unclear down what path they are leading us. However, what is certain is that we need other commoners to collectively imagine what our future could look like. This journal has once again shown Utrecht's great economic diversity, but the question of '*how to get together*' remains. As the indigenous Zapatistas in the jungle of Southern Mexico say: '*Preguntando caminamos*' (while asking questions, we walk). And so it is. We don't have all the answers yet, but we keep on walking nonetheless.

Koppelting festival - UB presentation *Commoning in the wild* (August 2016), Photo by Eline Wieriks

"PREGUN-TANDO CAMINA-MOS"

(While asking questions, we walk)

Indigenous Zapatistas in the jungle of Southern Mexico

Welkom in Utrecht: A CASE STUDY OF COMMONING IN UTRECHT

By Jennifer Suchland

Jennifer Suchland is an Associate Professor at the Ohio State University (2008-present) and works in both the Department of Women's, Gender and Sexuality Studies and Department of Slavic and East European Languages and Cultures. Her scholarship and activism have focused on how rights categories emerge, evolve and circulate culturally and through law. Jennifer's book, Economies of Violence: Transnational Feminism, Postsocialism, and the Politics of Sex Trafficking (Duke University Press, 2015), is a genealogy of global human trafficking discourse in and through the end of the Cold War. The project is tied to transnational feminist studies, feminist political economy, and critical human rights.

The question of what the commons is goes to the heart of the current refugee crisis. What are our common resources and who has access to them? What, or who, can take responsibility for people displaced or fleeing from violence? Are practices of commoning open only to those with citizenship papers? How can we craft commoning practices that ethically consider the precarious lives of the undocumented individual, the refugee, or the asylum seeker? Is it feasible, or even possible, to suggest that "no human being is illegal" – that, as humans, we have a right to be anywhere on the planet?

These questions rage at the center of the current political crisis of refugees entering Europe from North Africa and the Middle East. Indeed, as some have argued, the problem or "crisis" is not so much that thousands of people are fleeing their homes in search of safety, but that European states (and some of their citizens) are ill equipped (or reluctant) to accept them.

[1] **Lyndsey Stonebridge**
www.eurozine.com/articles/2015-12-01-stonebridge-en.html

[2] **Refugees**
www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-34131911

[3] **Jordan**
www.syrianrefugees.eu/?page_id=87

[4] **UNHCR**
www.syrianrefugees.eu

[5] **Most of the refugees**
www.upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/8/80/Map_of_the_European_Migrant_Crisis_2015.png

[6] **Asylum seekers**
www.ec.europa.eu/eurostat/statistics-explained/index.php/Asylum_statistics

[7] **Government officials**
www.nltimes.nl/2015/11/27/pm-rutte-netherlands-to-build-homes-for-24000-refugees

[8] **Temporary housing**
www.blikopnieuws.nl/nieuws/23

* THE TERM "POSTCOLONIAL" HERE REFERS TO COUNTRIES THAT HAVE BEEN COLONIZED AND GOVERNED BY MAINLY WESTERN STATES IN THE PAST. SOME OF THESE COUNTRIES ARE NOW "NEOCOLONIAL", MEANING THAT THESE FORMER COLONIES ARE STILL EXPLOITED BY RICH, OFTEN WESTERN COUNTRIES, ALBEIT IN DIFFERENT WAYS.

'Welcome refugees'
Amsterdam (2015)

Europe's Current Refugee Crisis in Context

It is important to catalogue the most recent wave of refugees coming to Europe with the history of other major influxes of refugees due to internal conflicts (such as WWII) or external conflicts (such as decolonization). As Lyndsey Stonebridge[1] reminds us, as we consider this history of displacement:

"We need to remember it is not a proud tradition of hospitality and compassion, which in any case is largely mythical. The twentieth century witnessed a refugee calamity the likes of which had never been seen before. From fleeing Armenians and Russians, Greeks, Turks, and Jews fleeing pogroms in the early part of the century to the catastrophe of the death camps, many suddenly discovered they were strangers in their own lands."

The ongoing movement of refugees from Syria to Europe is the result of internal conflicts in Syria, but this should also be linked to the history of French and Ottoman colonial conquest, as well as to recent American (and EU) military involvement in the region. Moreover, Syrian refugees[2] are joining the many other national groups with postcolonial (and neocolonial)* status coming from Iraq, Afghanistan, Eritrea, and Iran. While Europe may feel that it is drowning in refugees, the vast majority of those fleeing the war in Syria have gone to Turkey, Iraq, Lebanon, and Jordan[3]. According to the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR)[4], over 3 million people have fled to Syria's immediate neighbours, 6.5 million are internally displaced within Syria, and so far 150,000 have sought asylum in Europe. Most of the refugees who arrived in Europe are now being resettled in Germany.[5]

According to the Dutch office that coordinates shelter for asylum seekers, the Centraal Orgaan opvang asielzoekers (COA), the Netherlands resettles thousands of asylum seekers every year. In 2014, for example, the Netherlands granted 12,550 people refugee status, and these numbers will certainly increase given the precipitous rise in asylum seekers.[6] Indeed, due to the current crisis, government officials[7] recently agreed to build temporary housing[8] for an additional 14,000 refugees and permanent housing for 10,000 refugees. This decision was quite contentious and the debate about how many refugees to accept is ongoing. Local municipalities will be fined if

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they do not comply with the request for housing. Clearly, some local governments are more willing to accept this burden than others, and so the process of resettlement varies across the country.

In Utrecht, city officials have been open and welcoming of refugees. One reason may be because the local government has made a commitment to making Utrecht a "Human Rights City."[9] According to Wim Datema and Esther Feldmann[10],

"This public commitment is at the core of current activities to accommodate refugees in Utrecht. Apart from providing a centre for asylum seekers, the city has set up a number of emergency shelters to welcome refugees. At the same time the city is looking for additional temporary and permanent locations to house asylum seekers."

This commitment has made a big difference, however some residents are hesitant to have large shelters in the city. Some Utrechters using the slogan "AZC, weg ermee"[11] [*asylum seeker centre, get rid of it*] are creating a negative public discourse. In Utrecht and in other Dutch cities, supporters of Pegida[12] [the German right-wing movement that supports "anti-Islamization"] or Geert Wilders [a Dutch politician who opposes Islam] have rallied and expressed (at times violently[13]) opposition to receiving refugee.

In addition to the histories of displacement and of mass mobilizations of refugees, current events should be contextualized within Europe's complex economic migration situation. This is important because of the tensions and confusions between the categories of political and economic refugees or migrants*. Many more people are inclined to have empathy towards political refugees, whereas economic migrants are more often looked down upon (particularly undocumented migrants). In a recent documentary film, "*Dispereert Niet*,[14]" some of these negative attitudes are poignantly depicted. The film brings the lives of undocumented Indonesians and other economic migrants from former Dutch colonies out from the shadows.

Despite the fact that migratory labor is now a permanent feature of the EU, some politicians and citizens have negative views towards the people who come into (or move within) the EU for work. These negative views of economic migrants are used to question the acceptance of more asylum seekers and, as in recent political debates[15], to validate the need for increased border controls. This is because it is assumed that the influx of asylum seekers will also carry

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[9] **Human Rights City**
www.utrecht.nl/bestuur-en-organisatie/internationale-zaken/mensenrechten

[10] **Wim Datema and Esther Feldmann**
www.govint.org/good-practice/case-studies/welcome-to-utrecht-how-citizens-and-the-human-rights-city-work-together-to-coordinate-help-for-refugees

[11] **AZC, weg ermee**
www.humanrightsutrecht.blogspot.nl

[12] **Pegida**
www.wikiwand.com/en/Pegida

[13] **At times violently**
www.dutchnews.nl/news/archives/2016/01/refugee-centre-attackers-in-court

[14] **Dispereert Niet**
www.youtube.com/watch?v=92SAgJWDwyI&feature=youtu.be

[15] **Political debates**
www.dutchnews.nl/news/archives/2016/01/new-figures-dispute-timmermans-economic-migrants-claim

[16] **Welkom in Utrecht**
www.uvoorvluchtelingen.nl

[17] **Welkom in Utrecht**
www.facebook.com/welkominutrecht

[18] **Centraal Orgaan opvang Asielzoekers**
www.coa.nl

*** CAN WE SELF-EVIDENTLY CONSIDER ALL GRASSROOTS ACTIVITIES TO BE COMMONING? FOR EXAMPLE, IF REFUGEES HAVE NO SAY OVER WHERE COLLECTED RESOURCES END UP, THEY ARE NOT PART OF THE COMMUNITY THAT COULD MAINTAIN THOSE RESOURCES AS A COMMONS.

* THESE CATEGORIES ORIGINATE FROM THE CONVENTION RELATING TO THE STATUS OF REFUGEES, DRAFTED BY THE UNITED NATIONS IN 1951.

** WHAT DOES IT MEAN FOR THE AUTONOMY AND SUSTAINABILITY OF A COMMUNITY ECONOMY LIKE WELKOM IN UTRECHT THAT THE LOCAL GOVERNMENT RELIES SO HEAVILY ON THEIR VOLUNTEER WORK? HOW CAN WE UNDERSTAND THE VOLUNTEER WORK OF THESE KINDS OF CITIZEN INITIATIVES IN RELATION TO OUR CRUMBLING WELFARE STATE AND A GOVERNMENT THAT IS RETREATING FROM THE PUBLIC SECTOR?

large numbers of economic migrants who, it is assumed, do not deserve the same sympathy. Thus, some EU countries are putting up border restrictions as well as fences to curb the flow. These are controversial decisions given the fact that open internal borders (via the Schengen agreement) are a fundamental feature of the EU.

Welkom in Utrecht

Amidst the controversies and complications, citizens in Utrecht are trying to welcome refugees to the city and to help those displaced find a new home in Dutch society. Many people want to be involved, but there is a lot of coordination that goes along with this interest. This is where the group *Welkom in Utrecht* serves a vital role in Utrecht. The group was developed (at first separately, but now in coordination) as a website[16] and Facebook page[17].

I spoke with two of the four developers of the *Welkom in Utrecht* Facebook page on December 1, 2015. Rebecca de Kuijer and Katinka Jesse wanted to be a part of a response to help support the refugees coming to their city. The idea emerged in September 2015 when (with co-organizers Hellen Kooijman and Frank van Soest) they put up the Facebook group "*Welkom in Utrecht*." The page provides information about what resources and volunteers are needed by local organizations. Within 24 hours it seemed that the city government had incorporated the group into its strategic planning, relying on its organizers to coordinate community resources.** The volunteer organization has grown organically and continues to shift and evolve as both the refugee situation changes and as organizations outside the 'refugee care' circle become involved. The page has almost 7,000 followers.

What does *Welkom in Utrecht* do? In the spirit of commoning, the organization (via the Facebook page and website) provides a platform through which local people can offer their ideas for help and the government can direct that help to the refugees. There is a lot of grassroots interest, yet many people do not have ties to the longstanding organizations in the city that aid refugees or asylum seekers. So, the ideas and resources at the grassroots level (the commoning*** of resources and ideas) are connected to the efforts organized by the official government response to refugees, through *Welkom in Utrecht*.

Welkom in Utrecht plays an important role in the process of welcoming refugees to Utrecht and, ultimately, in giving them a connection to Dutch society. Certainly, their volunteer hours are valuable to the Utrecht gemeente (government) and the Centraal Orgaan opvang Asielzoekers (COA)[18], the primary government office that coordinates the resettlement process. The process of resettlement for the thousands of refugees arriving in the Netherlands is complex and challenging. Each town or city organizes a response, which is complicated by the shortage of housing in Holland. Refugees in the refugee shelters (*noodopvang* or *asielzoekerscentrum*) in Utrecht are typically only there for some time before they are moved to another location as their refugee status is processed.

Because of the shifting and precarious character of the refugee process, community support is quite important. And, while organizations supporting refugees and other vulnerable populations existed in Utrecht before the recent influx, *Welkom in Utrecht* has brought together groups who had not previously been partners. This networking and community building is an added benefit of *Welkom in Utrecht* and has arguably broadened the practices of commoning in Utrecht.

For example, in our interview Rebecca reflected on the fact that atheists and religious people bonded at volunteer sessions sorting clothes. This experience helps people feel connected to each other, even when they think differently or have different religious backgrounds. In addition, there are a lot of people who are concerned about the current refugee crisis but have not been

The children at primary school *De Kleine Dichter* asked all they wanted to know about refugees, their journey to the Netherlands, and their stay here, Source: Facebook - Welkom in Utrecht

part of groups like the Red Cross or *Villa Vrede*[19] [an organization that aids refugees and asylum seekers]. *Welkom in Utrecht* uses a modern interface and, consequently, has brought a new wave of concerned Utrechters into the collective support for refugees.

On the Facebook page you can find announcements for initiatives and calls for volunteers. These announcements for events or requests for volunteers are coordinated (via *Welkom in Utrecht*) with the local authorities. For example, in the Autumn of 2015 a network of mosques (including the Ulu mosque in Lombok) facilitated a clothes drive and needed volunteers to sort and organize the donations. This network is now called *Vluchtelingen Project Utrecht* (VPU)[20]. The call for volunteers went out on the Facebook page and dozens of people showed up to help. Later, the donations were then transported to the refugees at the temporary shelter. Another example is the organization *Eet Mee!*[21], which orchestrates community meals for the refugees. Other initiatives include film screenings, concerts, sharing music, playing football, and art lessons. Recently, in January 2016, the library of Utrecht promoted a language festival at the Kanaleneiland[22] branch in order to reach out to the hundreds of refugees now staying in this quarter of the city.

All of these initiatives are aimed at providing resources and comfort to the hundreds of refugees temporarily living in Utrecht. The organizers are also committed to the idea that these efforts are important for integrating refugees into Dutch society. Rather than wait months or possibly years for asylum seekers to receive their official paperwork, integration and empowerment can happen from the very beginning. Katinka believes that the Dutch should learn from past mistakes; hence, it is important to offer integration possibilities to newcomers from the very beginning. The process of integration is a two-way street. Dutch citizens must prepare themselves for accepting newcomers, and refugees need to find their way in a new and different culture. This process of mutual understanding (and struggle) is also part of the commoning process. To consider social resources as shared, there must be some recognition of where different people are coming from. Rebecca explains that *Welkom in Utrecht* facilitates this recognition:

"The refugee initiatives can lead to personal contact and mutual understanding. Many refugees who are currently in Utrecht will receive a residence permit. By familiarizing them with our country now, we are investing in the future." (AD 2015)

The first group of 500 refugees left Utrecht on November 4, 2015 (they were taken to Duinrell, Wassenaar) to continue their journey of resettlement. On November 20, 2015, a second group of refugees arrived in Utrecht. The work of *Welkom in Utrecht* is ongoing, and also shifting and open to change. As time passes, most refugees will become members of Dutch society. Thus, it is present in the minds of many volunteers, as with Rebecca and Katinka, that the process of commoning includes the long-term inclusion of newcomers. How will refugees become part of Dutch society? And what can its current inhabitants do to make it a hospitable place? Importantly, the process of commoning includes not only the sharing of resources – locating clothes, slippers and earplugs, or sharing the love for music and sport – but it also means sharing in the making of what our commons constitutes.

The security of having a place to live – not just in terms of shelter but also in terms of the ability to live in a state that provides basic human rights – is certainly part of the commons. Many believe it is, even as governments battle over the quantity of refugees they are willing to take. But this recent wave of refugees joins others who have been, or are still in, the process of obtaining legal status in the Netherlands. This fact should give current volunteers pause, as the voices of those who remain in legal limbo (and thus, in the shadows of Dutch society) suggest that resettlement is contested and complex. Organizations such as *Wij Zijn Hier*[23] [We Are Here] want to expose the difficult lives many refugees and migrants have because the Dutch government has delayed or refused official papers. So, while there may be a rush of empathy towards Syrian refugees because of the civil war in their country, there are many other refugees who slip through the cracks or who are not viewed with the same compassion. Looking more closely at this contradiction will be important for the mutual understanding and cultural integration that the Dutch government hopes to achieve. A branch of *Wij Zijn Hier* in Utrecht, for example, recently expressed their hopes for the city to recognize them by producing a cookbook. The *Wij Zijn Hier* cookbook[24] features photographs and recipes of dishes from the many countries that the refugees represent. Without proper residency status, asylum seekers are not allowed to work. This is financially hard but also keeps people on the sidelines of society. The cookbook (which is still being negotiated for legal purchase) is a tool to validate and give voice to these refugees and, importantly, to raise funds.

What will the future of commoning in Utrecht look like as newcomers become a more permanent feature of the city? Will *Welkom in Utrecht* broaden its scope to include initiatives that bridge the possible empathy gap between new and old refugees, or between refugees and economic migrants? These are complex but important questions, to which answers remain to be seen. Yet *Welkom in Utrecht* has embarked on a new mode and phase of commoning in the city of Utrecht.

[19] **Villa Vrede**
www.villavrede.nl

[20] **Vluchtelingen Project Utrecht**
www.facebook.com/groups/1652257241687317/?fref=nf

[21] **Eet Mee!**
www.eetmee.nl

[22] **Kanaleneiland**
www.youtube.com/watch?v=KBfXydNGk6Q&feature=youtu.be

[23] **We Are Here**
wijzijnhier.org

[24] **We are Here cookbook**
www.facebook.com/weareherecooking

Resto van Harte gave 300 food packages to the refugees in the shelter in Utrecht, Source: Facebook - Welkom in Utrecht

Adding color to the lives of the residents at the emergency shelter in Utrecht together with Hendra Versteegde , Source: Facebook - Welkom in Utrecht

What I learned from failed espresso machines

THE GIFT AND CIRCULAR ECONOMY:

at the Repair Cafés in Utrecht

By Chloe Lee

Chloe Lee is very curious about why and how people self-organize. Collaboration, a process of self-organization, is therefore central to her design and research practice. As a maker, she is interested in designing systems that foster experimental collaborations. These systems have taken the form of identity design, publishing, exhibition curation, and online platforms. To reflect on these endeavors, she writes about collaborations. Before her design career, she worked as a research analyst for the Canadian Government and Ipsos, a global market research consultancy. Fortuitously, her user research background and design practice came together. Now Chloe is a UX/UI designer based in Amsterdam and holds an MFA from Rhode Island School of Design.

"PEOPLE LIKE TO BE TOGETHER, TO SHARE THEIR KNOWLEDGE TO REPAIR THINGS, AND DO SOMETHING FOR THE ENVIRON-MENT."

"It is always fascinating to see the moment visitors first come through the Repair Café door… people often look a little bit disoriented, not knowing what to expect," says Eva, a volunteer on site.

Repair Café, a place where repair specialists fix broken things for free, is clear in concept, yet complex in practice. Perhaps we are too used to throwing things away and a second life sounds too good to be true? Whatever the hesitation to enter a Repair Café, it is alleviated after visitors set foot through the door.

"Welcome to the Repair Café! Can I get you something to drink? Coffee, tea…" welcomes Eva, all smiles, as I watch visitors trickle in on a rainy Saturday afternoon.

Man with broken chainsaw
Woman with broken coffee bean grinder
Woman with broken espresso machine
Man with broken espresso machine
Man with broken laptop
Woman with broken espresso machine

With broken objects in hand, visitors sit down by their respective Repair Specialist. After a brief exchange and a damage assessment, the repair session begins. What follows is a symphony of mechanical sounds: drilling, knocking, and clicking that ebb and flow across different repair stations. The buzz is only punctuated by silent pauses to reassess the operation of devices.

A successful repair is unmistakably marked by a burst of cheers when the object is revived. If the object is beyond repair, the visitor and the repairman share a mutual sense of regret and relief knowing that they have done their best.

Such is the standard workflow of a Repair Café, a concept originated by Martine Postma in 2009 in Amsterdam. Now a global phenomenon with 980 locations in 24 countries, Repair Café has 10 locations in Utrecht alone. I corresponded with Nina Blanken, the communications officer at the Repair Café Foundation (Stichting Repair Café), about the past and future of the growing initiative:

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CL: What is the origin of the Repair Café?

NB: People who have repair skills to share, who might otherwise be sidelined, are getting involved again. Valuable practical knowledge is getting passed on. Things are being used for longer and don't have to be thrown away. This reduces the volume of raw materials and energy needed to make new products. It cuts CO^2 emissions, for example, because manufacturing new products and recycling old ones cause CO^2 to be released.

The Repair Café teaches people to see their possessions in a new light and, once again, to appreciate their value. The Repair Café helps change people's mindset. This is essential to kindle people's enthusiasm for a sustainable society.

But most of all, the Repair Café just wants to show how much fun repairing things can be, and how easy it often is.

CL: What is your long term vision for the Repair Café, for example, education, expansion, etc.?

NB: Martine Postma has a New Year's dream: Repair Café lessons for all primary school students. In the coming year, Stichting Repair Café will work together with interested teachers to make a curriculum.

CL: During my visit, I noticed that visitors tend to be older. Why do you think that is and is there a plan to attract younger demographics?

NB: I have spoken with younger people about this and there are a few reasons. We don't offer 24/7 service. They often don't know about it probably because publicity is not targeted at this younger audience. Also, we young people like to buy stuff… new or second hand.

However, we have a plan to reach more purposefully to younger people. If the repairers get better at repairing small consumer electronics like smartphones, tablets and laptops, the Repair Café will be more attractive to younger visitors. We are currently talking to partners who may train Repair Café volunteers in this area.

CL: Each Repair Café is independently operated. How do you oversee the operations? What are the biggest organizational and structural challenges facing the Repair Café?

NB: We have a starter kit that has some rules and guidelines. We can't oversee how each Repair Café is managed. Local Repair Cafés need to find and keep good, enthusiastic volunteers: people that can repair and communicate with visitors. They also need a location, tools and publicity.

CL: Why do you think people volunteer at the Repair Café?

NB: People like to be together, [to] share their knowledge, [to] repair things, and do something for the environment.

CL: Do you ever intend to repair non-material things?

NB: You mean a broken heart?
No.

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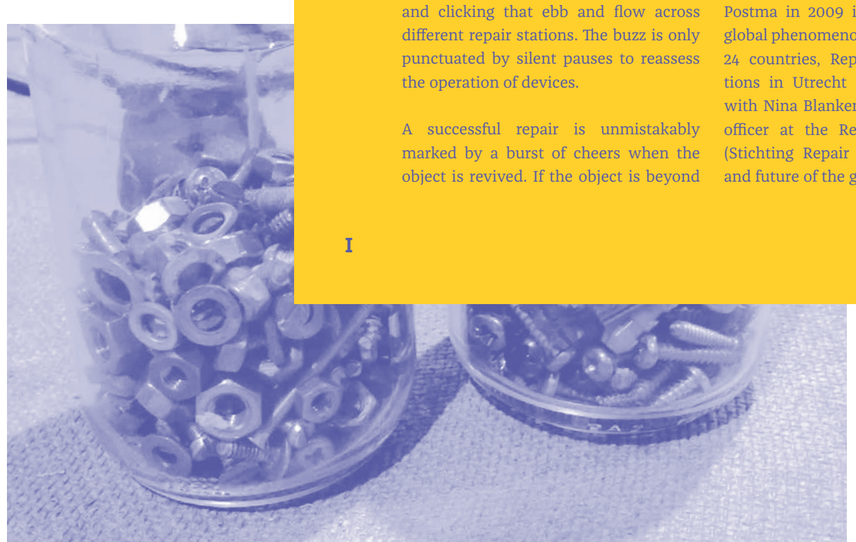
"PEOPLE WHO HAVE REPAIR SKILLS TO SHARE, WHO MIGHT OTHERWISE BE SIDELINED."

All photos in this article have been taken by Chloe Lee



"A GIFT THAT DOES NOTHING TO ENHANCE SOLIDARITY IS A CONTRA-DICTION."

Mary Douglas, *The Gift*

The biography of a thing: determining an object's value

The woman with the coffee bean grinder sits down and waits for the next available repair specialist. It is hard to date her coffee bean grinder just from looking at the classic design.

"It is actually from my grandma, from the '50s," the woman says. "After she passed away, I started using it again. It stopped working a while ago and I thought that I would bring it to the Repair Café and give it a go..."

For this woman, and many others that come to the Repair Café, their objects carry long and complex stories. Objects may not be able to speak, yet they define users as much as users define them.

Anthropologist Igor Kopytoff (1986) points out that there is a tendency towards "conceptually separating people from things, and of seeing people as the natural preserve for individuation...and things are the natural preserve for commoditization."

Sociologist Bruno Latour argues against this object-human divide and writes that "our social relations will rarely consist of human-to-human connections...or of object-object connections, but will probably zigzag from one to the other."

This is to say that objects, similar to humans, have social lives too. To better understand our material culture, we must also analyze the biography of the objects. Kopytoff invites us to ask the following questions:

Where does the thing come from and who made it? What are the recognized "ages" or periods in the thing's "life," and what are the cultural markers for them? How does the thing's use change with its age, and what happens to it when it reaches the end of its usefulness?

I ask the volunteers if they are ever curious about where the broken objects come from.

"I once saw a vintage Dutch dollhouse that seemed to be the dollhouse owned by the visitor since he/she was a child. It could very well be an heirloom in the family," remarks Eva.

Raymond, a Repair Specialist also recalls, "We typically don't ask visitors the story behind their objects, but there is a lady that comes in regularly for small repair jobs. Sometimes she brings in items clearly beyond repair. Last week, she came by with broken Christmas lights that were not worth fixing in my opinion. Nevertheless, I tried to help. In the process, she revealed to me that she was autistic and these visits give her comfort and the needed human contact."

It is a tall order to say that Repair Cafés can repair broken hearts. However, objects can sometimes mediate and restore social relationships. This is what elevates and endows objects with values that far exceed pure economic worth, unbeknownst to the very hands that bring these objects a second life at the Repair Café.

No free gift in the gift economy

We have looked at the social and economic relationships between visitors and objects, but what about the volunteers? What is their place in this network of humans and objects?

The Repair Café operates in a space that is independent of market stipulation. From an economic point of view, volunteers participate in a *gift economy* where they devote their time and knowledge to an endeavor without explicit returns. While I do not doubt the intention and conviction of the volunteers, I feel the need to re-examine our understanding of the "free gift" - in this case, labor time and repair services free of charge.

In his book *The Gift*, sociologist Marcel Mauss points out that gifts circulate in a system of reciprocity* instead of singularity. Anthropologist Mary Douglas further sheds light on Mauss' text challenging the "free gift" misnomer:

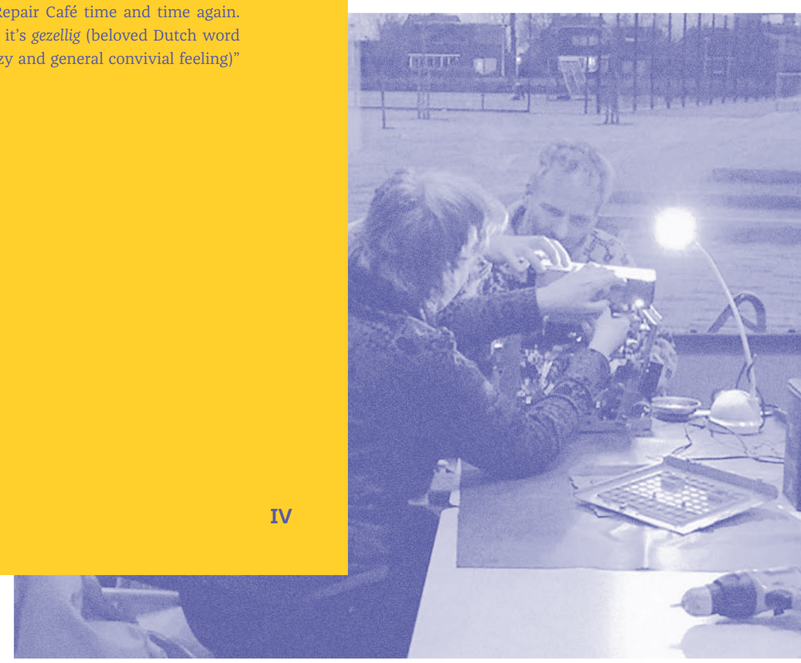
What is wrong with the so-called free gift is the donor's intention to be exempt from return gifts coming from the recipient. Refusing requital puts the act of giving outside any mutual ties. Once given, the free gift entails no further claims from the recipient. The public is not deceived by free gift vouchers. For all the ongoing commitment the free gift gesture has created, it might just as well never have happened.

If Mauss is right, the volunteers are probably experiencing a kind of intangible reward. This is not surprising; most of us can relate to the joy of helping others. What is intriguing is the way Repair Specialists grapple to concretize the sense of fulfillment from volunteering.

One bike repair specialist thinks long and hard when I ask him about his motivations to volunteer. He eventually tells me a story to illustrate his point. He says that one day a handicapped man came in with his custom-made bike. The man complained of some nuisance from the bike. After a closer look at the bike, the Repair Specialist found the brake barely hanging on. Both men knew that it was a close call and that the owner had narrowly prevented a potentially life-threatening situation. In a very concrete way, this Repair Specialist found fulfillment in circumventing an accident.

Ruud, a Repair Specialist, puts it most succinctly when I ask him why he returns to the Repair Café time and time again. "I guess it's *gezellig* (beloved Dutch word for a cozy and general convivial feeling)" he said.

* WE THINK RECIPROCITY IS CRUCIAL TO BUILD THE SOLIDARITY THAT IS NEEDED IN A SOCIETY BASED ON THE COMMONS. YOU HAVE TO BE WILLING TO HELP ONE ANOTHER AND TRUST OTHERS TO BE THERE FOR YOU WHEN YOU NEED THEM, WITHOUT EXPECTING IMMEDIATE RETURN.



Circular economy: revelations from glitchy coffee makers

"What is the most popular item that you have had to repair?" I ask each Repair Specialist. Almost unanimously, the answer is "Philips Senseo Espresso Maker."

It is so widely repaired that one of the volunteers has made a repair manual specifically for this product and shared the manual across all Repair Cafés in the Netherlands. A quick search on YouTube also returned hundreds of homemade tutorials for troubleshooting this product.

Taco, a veteran Repair Specialist, tells me that it is much easier to repair the coffee bean grinder from the 1950s than a similar piece of equipment manufactured today. In Taco's words:

A few decades ago, consumer products were made so that you could disassemble them and replace broken parts when necessary. Now, products are made in one piece, making it very challenging and expensive to repair. Most people just end up throwing the whole thing away.

Taco's comment about the life histories of these commodities shows that knowledge is fragmented between producers, distributors, and consumers as our capitalist society increasingly subdivides production into multiple specialized compartments in order to increase efficiency and save on cost. This knowledge gap inevitably creates growing consumer ignorance.

Objects that are increasingly manufactured with limited life span reflect "built-in obsolescence" - a business strategy to encourage consumers to buy a new model instead of trying to salvage the old one.

In the book *Cradle to Cradle: Rethinking the Way We Make Things*, authors Michael Braungart and William McDonough point out that objects with planned obsolescence are products of a "cradle to grave" manufacturing system. In the "cradle to grave" model, the product lifecycle is linear, going from consumer to a landfill or incinerator in a relatively short time.

This model produces tremendous waste. Products that could have been degraded and reused are simply sitting in the landfill. Braungart and McDonough reveal:

What most people see in their garbage cans is just the tip of a material iceberg; the product itself contains on average only 5 percent of the raw materials involved in the process of making and delivering it.

A study conducted by the United Nations Environmental Programme projected that by 2050 we will have doubled our consumption of minerals, fossil fuels, and biomass to 140 billion tons.

Conversely, a "cradle to cradle" model supports circular economies. By design, products in a circular economy minimize waste and pollution. At the end of its lifecycle, a product will break down into bio-nutrients that can safely enter the biosphere, or into industrial nutrients that can be reused for future industrial production.

The European Environmental Commission, in collaboration with a network of grassroots partners including the Repair Café, is currently drafting policies that support circular economies. In a joint mission statement published in 2015, the committee proposed plans that require manufacturers to produce repairable products with non-proprietary parts, as well as to communicate the expected product lifespan to consumers. Lastly, the mission statement calls for reducing the VAT on repair activities as an incentive.*

Last Thoughts

As inspiring as it is to see Repair Cafés at the forefront of change, I realize the difficulty of assessing their effectiveness. It will be a long road to align policies, businesses, and consumers towards a circular economy. However, any large-scale change starts with a gradual and collective shift in the individual mindset.

The Repair Cafés have prompted me to rethink my relationship with the material world and to acknowledge that humans construct machines as much as machines construct our habits, behaviors, economies, and, ultimately, our histories.

Perhaps for some, visiting a Repair Café is not all about sustainability. It is simply about having coffee with others who come with broken espresso machines.

* WHAT DOES THIS COLLABORATION WITH EU INSTITUTIONS MEAN FOR THE AUTONOMY OF REPAIR CAFE? WHAT DOES IT MEAN THAT THE VOLUNTARY WORK AND EXPERTISE OF THE REPAIR SPECIALISTS IS USED AND DEPLOYED BY AN AUTHORITY LIKE THE EU? DOES REPAIR CAFE RUN THE RISK OF HAVING THEIR GOOD INTENTIONS CO-OPTED AND EXPLOITED?

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"I GUESS IT'S GEZELLIG"

In Utrecht Overvecht, 100 people practice

COMMUNAL LIVING

looking for (un)usual ways of living together

By Maartje Oostdijk

Maartje Oostdijk is a PhD student at the University of Iceland and Stockholm University. Her research focuses on fisheries, connecting socio-economic research of fisheries to biological studies of the ecosystem. She is interested in ecologically oriented theories of economy and other alternatives to the mainstream neoclassical economic thought that has proven to be damaging to our ecosystems and societies. Her studies in environmental science and the collaboration within (Un)usual Business have created a passion for the quest to find (even) more commons. For her commons show an alternative to the individualistic and often non-egalitarian practice of privatization. Having studied also Fine Arts in the past, Maartje is still drawing and photographing in her free time. Next to that she is very thankful for the many public pools and geothermal hot springs that make Iceland a livable almost Arctic rock in the Atlantic.

Photo report by Maartje Oostdijk.
View the full photo series on
www.unusualbusiness.nl

"PHYSICAL SPACES ARE WHERE THE RULES AND THE MEANS OF SHARING DEVELOP"

Stavros Stavrides
(freely translated)

The wood stove outside at de *Klopvaart*

One of my professors started a class on the topic of '*the commons*' by showing a picture of piles of unwashed dishes in an altogether dirty kitchen. The kitchen looked like a typical kitchen unit from the type of student housing in which some of my friends still lived at the time. In my own student house, the kitchen was in a similar condition. The professor asked whose kitchen looked as dirty as the one in the image, and a couple of students raised their hands. This disregard for hygiene was all too familiar to me as well, so I also raised my hand in admission.

The professor didn't follow up on our raised hands, as he assumed that our kitchens looked at least slightly better than his nightmare example. He asked us how we organized our shared living spaces – our domestic *commons*. Did we have cleaning schedules, or a penalty system? Many students answered affirmatively to the former question: our kitchens had

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cleaning schedules, and we had mutual agreements that regulated the use of our shared spaces. Beginning in the early 1970s, Nobel Prize-winning economist Elinor Ostrom broke with the dominant paradigms in economics and environmental science, which assumed that people were incapable of regulating their common property, and that regulation from above would always be necessary. (See Garrett Hardin's well-known essay, "*The Tragedy of the Commons.*")[1] Ostrom's research on how different communities successfully managed common resources proved that under the right circumstances, groups of people can regulate a commons perfectly well by themselves.

Living together

De Klopvaart[2] is one such example of a self-organized commons in Utrecht. *De Klopvaart* is an intentional community of around 85 adults and 15 children, and

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[1] **Ostrom, E. (2015).** *Governing the commons*. Cambridge, United Kingdom, Cambridge University Press.

[2] **De Klopvaart**
www.klopvaart.nl

Two fridges in the shared kitchen

is located in the neighborhood of Overvecht, Utrecht. A number of adjacent apartment complexes around a shared courtyard offer an array of opportunities for ways of living that are interesting to (Un)usual Business' perspective and case studies. Although it doesn't show on the outside, the way people live together here differs radically from the individualistic uniformity of the other apartment complexes in the neighborhood. I talked to Dirk (29) and Hanz (60), who each have their own living space within the two different apartment complexes that constitute *de Klopvaart*.

What distinguishes an intentional community from the chaos of collective living in a student dorm? Dirk attributes it to 'commitment' - in his view, the people who join *de Klopvaart* are like-minded, which makes them more engaged. After becoming fed up with 'the tragedy of the common' rooms of his student house, Dirk began to look for a different way of living communally. While a student dorm places people together out of (economic) necessity, in an intentional community all members choose individually to live together with like-minded others. Even Dirk's

Hanz's living room

Hanz in his room

dorm's 'clothespin system' could not prevent 'phantom dishes' from piling up in the sink, and his housemates' nonchalance in regards to hygiene was tangible. While *de Klopvaart* has very few fixed rules, its members put time into it as they see fit to maintain the space. Although Dirk reports that there are few real obligations, he does feel that everyone is expected to contribute.

de Klopvaart contains four clusters of houses, and each cluster consists of three houses. Each house is divided differently into living units, and each has its own customs. When I ask Dirk which kinds of things or activities are shared, he answers: "mostly practical things," primarily referring to the physical spaces of *de Klopvaart*. According to Greek architectural theorist Stavros Stavrides, these physical spaces are sites where the rules and the means of sharing develop, which makes them crucial to this story of a residential commons.[3] Dirk's house, for example, shares a common living room and kitchen. As I follow Dirk through the common living room and kitchen, I observe that there is still a Christmas tree alongside a lot of furniture, many board games, and other toys. Dirk

[3] **Stavrides, S. (2016).** *Common Space: The City As Commons*. London, Zed Books Limited.

* DOES EVERYONE NEED TO CONTRIBUTE THE SAME AMOUNT OF TIME, OR SHARE IN THE SAME KIND OF TASKS TO SUSTAIN A COMMONS? DOES THERE NEED TO BE SOME FORM OF SOCIAL CONTROL TO ENSURE THAT PEOPLE CONTRIBUTE ENOUGH?

mumbles: "Yes, the living room is basically the family room." The kitchen is tidy and clean, and contains many different sets of dinnerware contributed by the house's many different occupants. Hanz shares his kitchen with a younger man who lives on the same floor. He says it's like sharing the kitchen with his son. While I'm trying to take a picture of his tidy, cozy kitchen from the narrow space of the corridor, Hanz calls out from the living room that it is typical for such kitchens to contain two fridges. Acknowledging his point, I try as best as I can to frame both fridges in one picture.

Compared to the kibbutz Hanz lived for 14 years, he says that living at *de Klopvaart* is 'child's play.' Here, his door can be locked for two weeks and no one will confront him about it, while the kibbutz, where his grown-up children still live, expects a lot more from its residents. On a kibbutz everyone has chores, members work together on household and agricultural tasks, and they collectively produce sustenance for the whole. And, in addition to collective child-rearing practices, everyone on the kibbutz earns the same income. Hanz is happy with this new community,

where he has lived for some three to four years, although he sometimes lets some discontent show: some people at *de Klopvaart* contribute less than others and are not called out on it.* "There are no sanctions. It's just accepted."

Later in our conversation, Hanz provides some nuance to these earlier statements. Supposedly, around 15% of the members contribute less than is expected of them. He also adds that over the years some people have appropriated more than is fair. "Some occupants have appropriated more than others over the years. That can be a cause of conflicts." Such people may put their mark on common property more than others, take up more physical space than others, or do fewer of the shared chores. There is no established procedure for dealing with this discrepancy. At most, you can file a complaint with the board. While none of the examples Hanz mentions are serious, they are sometimes the primary reason for a person to move into a different house within *de Klopvaart*, or to leave the community entirely.

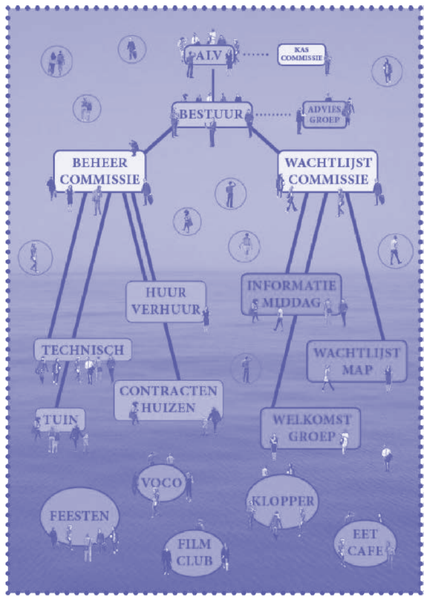
Legally, the community is registered as an association,

and everyone who decides to live at *de Klopvaart* is expected to join a commission. Figure 1 shows the structure of the many different commissions within the community. When the community was founded in 1984, there were only two commissions: one for administration and one to manage the waiting lists. As the community grew, the structure was expanded; a commission for leasing and renting was added, as well as one to organize an information day for interested people. There are also commissions that are less affiliated with the logistical tasks of the original two, such as the food collective (VoCo), of which Dirk is a member. As part of the magazine commission, Hanz publishes '*de Klopper*' three times a year, and the publication is mainly filled with stories from residents. There is both a common garden area and project room, each of which are managed by their respective commissions.

Dirk gives me a short tour of the VoCo shop. They don't sell fresh vegetables or fruit, but all of the products are organic: crackers, rice cakes, quinoa, and more. Dirk points out a give-away shelf, and the Christmas packages they made for all the volunteers. Pumpkins

VoCo shop

Figure 1: The structure of the many different commissions within the de Klopvaart community



are spread out on the ground, with the names of the volunteers and a thank-you card.

The community has its own organizational structure, with several levels of organization. The commissions have their own rules to ensure that the shared spaces (VoCo, the project room, and the garden) are kept clean and treated respectfully. On a higher level, the board communicates directly with the buildings' owner, Portaal, while the advice group, in turn, advises the board. Three times year a general meeting is held for all members, in which every adult resident has a voice. Hanz says only about one third of occupants participates in these meetings.

Hanz describes one example of a topic that might come up during these meetings - the association collectively uses a green/environmentally conscious energy provider, but one of the apartment complexes was clever enough to sign a different, cheaper contract. This action violated the association's statutes, making it illegal. If every house wanted to make this decision for itself, the statutes would first have to be adjusted by a notary, and this would be quite pricey.

Hanz talks skeptically about a group of residents who are working on the topic of social cohesion. This group convened to work on improving the social cohesion and relations within the community. Dirk and Hanz agree that there are not many common activities for the whole community: a film screening every two weeks, a food café six times a year, a garden party every now and then, and sometimes people organize gatherings for the holidays. New Years and *Sinterklaas*, for instance, are sometimes celebrated together.

Potential newcomers can visit *de Klopvaart* during an information day where they can sign up to be put on a waiting list. Usually, the commission in charge of it aims for a waiting list of around 70 interested people. When a house has a vacancy, they get the folder with the list of candidates and select the people that they like. The next step is to invite these candidates for a visit to get acquainted with the specific houses with a vacancy. On average, five new people join every year, and every new tenant signs an individual contract with Portaal. In this respect, the process works similarly to most other housing situations, with only the democratic principle as the differentiating

character. In a regular rented house, tenants do not get to decide who their neighbors are, and maintenance of any shared spaces is often outsourced.

When I ask Hanz why people leave *de Klopvaart*, he mentions two main reasons. First, there are tensions and discontent among fellow tenants – i.e., conflict. The second reason he mentions has to do with relationships and family composition. Some residents want to move in with their partner, or don't want to raise children in an intentional community.

Dirk is very content with his decision to live at *de Klopvaart*. After travelling through Southern Europe and Morocco and doing a lot of volunteer work here – both for intentional communities and for other projects – he was looking for a place in Utrecht to live communally and less passively, but also to escape his more traditional student housing situation. Walking around *de Klopvaart*, it appears that the 15% who don't contribute enough according to Hanz don't leave much of a mark on the community. The houses look orderly, cozy, and clean to me, and the verdant and deliberate garden is in stark contrast to the one

in my own student house, which is full of weeds and discarded furniture. On the other hand, in the '*De Klopper*' Magazine an ex-tenant indicates that she is glad to part with the unmaintainable and weed-filled garden, as well as with her noisy neighbors. She is moving in with her boyfriend – just the two of them – on a regular street with families and comfortable contact with the neighbors. Although there are still strides to be made in terms of community spirit and organization, *de Klopvaart* does offer a very livable and harmonious environment. It is certainly different from my messy student house. Still, sharing common property always involves more compromise than living on your own. Fortunately, *de Klopvaart* offers its occupants many other advantages, and for now Dirk and Hanz have no plans to leave the community.

This article was translated from Dutch.

XI

Bench at *de Klopvaart*

Photo report by Maartje Oostdijk. View the full photo series on www.unusualbusiness.nl

ARISAN REVISITED: NOTES ON PRECARIOUSNESS

By Nuraini Juliastuti

Parasite Lottery Lucky Draw #1 (June 2015), Photo by Carlijn Bakker

On the 9th of June 2016, artist Wok The Rok organized *Parasite Lottery* in collaboration with the Casco team.

Parasite Lottery, inspired by *arisan*, is a pilot collective lottery system for art organisations in the Netherlands and their communities. For Nuraini Juliastuti, *Parasite Lottery* was an inspiration to do further research on *arisan*.

More about *Parasite lottery* can be found at www.parasitelottery.com

Arisan is a popular community-based savings association in Indonesia. Amid various ways of saving and credit facilitated by modern banking platforms, *arisan* proves to be a sustaining mechanism for accumulating money. What aspects of *arisan* to help contribute to its sustainability?

Arisan: a transitional economic system

Jan Newberry defines *arisan* as a monthly credit lottery and describes how it works as follows: "At each meeting, members contribute a fixed amount, and each in turn receives the entire collected amount during the course of the *arisan*'s run (several weeks, months, or as long as it takes). Although identified here as a credit lottery, the *arisan* is just as easily described as a savings association."[1] The members of *arisan* refer to it as a way of saving—a forced one. There are other definitions, however.

Edward Miguel, Paul Gertler, and David I. Levine discuss *arisan* as an Indonesian typical self-help group that built on the foundation of social networking, saving mechanism, and loans provision.[2] Kempe Ronald Hope defines it as a group saving association in which temporary loans are possible.[3] Bala Shanmugam refers to it as a rotating credit association.[4] Both Hope and Shanmugam respectively emphasize *arisan* as part of the subterranean and informal economy. They provide many examples to show the existence of *arisan*-like mechanisms in different contexts—*tontines* and *kootu* (Malaysia), *paluwagan* (the Philippines), *adashi* or *cha* in Nigeria, ROSCA or rotating saving credit association (South Africa), *chita* (India), *sou-sou* (Trinidad and Tobago), *tanda* (Mexico), and *gameya* (Egypt).

The emphasis on informality indicates the function of *arisan* as a transitional economic system. For those who are not familiar with the cold and bureaucratic banking system, the familiarity of *arisan* is a feature to make it easier to partake in organizing personal finance. *Arisan* is the intermediary, "the middle rung", says Geertz, from a traditionalistic agrarian society to a commercial one.

More economic

According to Geertz, *arisan* has become "more and more specifically economic rather than diffusely social institutions."[5] It has become the norm to be part of two, three, or even more *arisan* groups. The reason is to be able to save more. On the one hand, it indicates willingness to save. On the other, however, the savings might be distributed for different expenses and needs, and dissolved as soon as they are obtained. To illustrate this, I use my mother's story as an example. She is a member of four *arisan* groups. As much as my mother enjoys going

1 **Newberry**, *Rituals of Rule in the Administered Community: The Javanese Selametan Reconsidered*, 1296-7.

2 **Miguel, Gertler, and Levine**, *Does Industrialization Build or Destroy Social Networks?*, 290.

3 **Hope**, *Growth and Impact of the Subterranean Economy in the Third World*, 869.

4 **Shanmugam**, *Socio-economic Development Through the Informal Credit Market*, 209.

5 **Geertz**, *The Rotating Credit Association: A 'Middle Rung' in Development*, 246.

6 **Shanmugam**, *ibid.*, 219.

7 **Geertz**, *ibid.*, 247.

8 **Shanmugam**, *op.cit.*

9 **Geertz**, *ibid.*, 260.

10 **Geertz**, *ibid.*, 243.

11 **Bähre**, *Money and Violence: Financial Self-Help Groups in a South African Township*, 90.

12 **Bähre**, *ibid.*, 99.

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to *arisan*, there were many occasions where she could not attend due to her work obligations. Despite being busy, she did not want to miss a single *arisan* meeting, and at once lose the possibility of *narik*. A common strategy that is applied to deal with this problem is to get a representative whom is tasked with paying the contribution money. A simple solution is to get a *wakil*, or representative—for example, a daughter or close relative. My mother often asked my older sister to represent her.

The social meaning of *arisan*, often unsettled by the busy and hectic lives of its members, has the potential to be reproduced and revitalized in some ways. The difficulty in getting a representative is because *arisan* requires high social skills; a skill not everyone is at ease with. Especially if this includes chit-chat with a group of much older women. The challenge is to convince the prospective representative that going to *arisan* can be an OK experience too. After regularly being present at my mother's *arisan* groups, my sister eventually had the idea of joining the groups herself. Rather than going to *arisan* as a mere representative, she made the most of it by subscribing to its meaning—a powerful economic institution.

Another aspect to reveal from the fear of losing the opportunity to get the *arisan* fund is an attempt to learn to commit to the basic principle of the *arisan*, as Shanmugam writes, "the duty-bound to make regular contributions."[6] The failure to provide the commitment would result in shame[7] and distrust among the group. Because it suggests the lack of "discipline to set aside money regularly."[8] This is an aspect, which has brought Geertz to conclude *arisan* as an "educational mechanism." The educational value lies in its capacity "to change their whole value framework from one emphasizing particularistic, diffuse, affective, and ascriptive ties between individuals, to one emphasizing—within economic contexts—universalistic, affectively neutral, and achieved ties between them."[9]

Communal harmony

Kerukunan, communal harmony, manifested in the gathering, has been the key element in the operationalization of *arisan* (see Geertz).[10] Geertz alludes to the word '*arisan*' as *mutual help*. My assumption is that it derives from Javanese, the language spoken by the people in Mojokuto, Geertz's main research area. But 'arisan' sounds like 'warisan', an Indonesian word, which literally means an inheritance. It derives from 'waris', a Javanese word that is absorbed by Indonesian, which means an inheritor. The collected lump sum of the *arisan*, succeeded to one member to the other, indeed feels like a collective inheritance.

The gathering aspect aside, based on my childhood memories, *arisan* is an opportunity to share good food and eat together. The host of the *arisan* meeting always provides special food, the kind of food and drinks that might not be available on a daily basis. Eating together is an added element that makes *arisan* pleasurable. Going to an *arisan* is a much-awaited event, because it is like going out to eat, which does not occur often. For the same reason, I liked it when my mother asked me to come to an *arisan* with her. Though I always ended up doing my own things there—sitting quietly next to my mother, reading.

To organize an *arisan* is like organizing a feast. It is a time-consuming process, which involves complicated preparation. The whole house has to be clean and tidy (in fact, the host needs to perform well too—wearing a proper outfit is a must). Beautiful plates, bowls, mugs, and jars are curated and displayed out on the table as part of the food display. The guests will praise the delicious food provided. They will extend particular attention to the spatiality of the *arisan* — the house of the host (the neatness of the living room, what paintings, photos, and other things are displayed on the walls, or the cleanliness of the toilet). The host will go about *arisan* preparation as best she can in order to avoid being the subject of gossip. Gossip, *ngobrol-ngorbol*, and other types of casual conversations are essential parts of the meeting. The members express enthusiasm for *arisan* by coming early (so that there will be ample time for chit-chatting and gossiping).

Arisan is a powerful performative tool. It is an open platform that can be appropriated for showing the current state of possession to others within a familiar environment.

The hosts have to use their personal money to prepare the food. Some feel burdened with this aspect, since it seems contrary to the spirit of *arisan* as a saving mechanism. While the social aspect of *arisan* is highly valued, it entails performing a series of careful calculations. It would be careless to spend large parts of the saving just for food. Some *arisans* ask their members to contribute an extra amount of money to be allocated to create a collective saving pot. The collective saving pot can be used for different purposes—funding for the food preparation included.

For practical and economic reasons, some hosts choose to provide take-away snacks in boxes instead. It removes the risk of losing the lavish element that is commonly expected from *arisan* food. Nonetheless it does not seem to reduce the excitement that emerges from getting free food. When I did not join my mother to an *arisan*, I would wait for her at home in anticipation of receiving a small box of snacks.

Frictions

As a savings association based on mutual help principle, the operationalization scope of *arisan* is limited to small groups in which the members know each other. Researches on *arisan* confirm the condition that it would not occur in a group where the members are unfamiliar to each other. The meaning of mutual help is restricted and not inclusive. What criteria is there for someone to be considered and invited as an *arisan* member? Inclusion and exclusion are two factors to govern the existence of *arisan*. It points to the limit of the common aspect of a community-based alternative financial group.

According to Erik Bähre, when writing about ROSCA in a South African township, 'helping each other', in many contexts, is often not compatible with 'taking care of oneself' — "'helping each other' is centered on sharing, while 'taking care of oneself' valued accumulation."[11] The politics of everyday life is composed of countless moments where one has to make, again Bähre, "precarious choices" concerning when to help the others and to take care of personal safety. When helping each other and taking care of oneself collides, it results in frictions and episodes of what Bähre coined as "reluctant solidarity".[12]

Precariousness

Difficult times often come unexpectedly. It causes precarious feelings. Not everyone has an advantage of being in a position where the availability of resources is abundant, or having a wealthy network to hold on. And nothing can be more dreadful than having debt bondage. The fear for debt is strong. Credit and debt have a long history in Southeast Asia. They informed social structures in many levels.[13] It tells about the power of the creditor and the limitation of the debtor. *Arisan* emerges as a support institution that derives from the familial realm. At once it is a mechanism with the certainty that each person would be able to support his or her own needs.

Arisan is often considered a typical *ibu-ibu*, or woman's practice. Plenty of research suggests it is not a gendered practice. To locate *arisan* in the everyday domain of women provides space to examine the use of *arisan* and imagination of precariousness within the inter-relational framework of the wife, the husband, and the family. Hanna Papanek and Laurel Schwede read *arisan* as part of a woman's strategy to help deal with economic stress of the family. Further, they see it as part of the conscious decision of a woman to actively engage in earning and managing in the family.[14] It signifies a degree of independence. The husband, the children, or other members of the family usually do not put serious attention to *arisan*. Such attitude stems from a perspective of the practice as woman's practice. It has made *arisan* a special locus to lend freedom in managing the fund obtained.

A woman and mother, in Papanek and Schwede's research, found many reasons to participate in *arisan* and to think about how to make and save more money for her family. Throughout time women have been affected by different kinds of uncertainty — the inflation of the 1950s and 1960s, the Japanese occupation, the fear of hunger, the fight for independence from the Dutch — experiences, which shaped childhood and disrupted schooling.[15] Each woman might have different reason, which encourages her to join an *arisan*. My mother always thinks about her desires for having enough money for my sisters' family and myself. The purpose of the money does not need to be specific. What is important is there is enough money to be used when the needs call. My older sister always thinks about money to fund the education needs of her children.

Keep going

There have been attempts at modifying the structure of *arisan*. In a recent conversation with a friend, I was told that she participated in an *arisan*, in which three persons would get the money in one 'pull' (*narik*). It reduces the amount of money received, since the lump sum fund needs to be divided into three. At least, it is certain that fresh cash will be at hand on a scheduled time. There are many factors to ignite precariousness. Hence the feeling seems to be persistent. This is a factor to maintain the relevancy of *arisan*. *Arisan* is a known practice emerged as cultural reference to approach uncertainty. It is an attempt to come to grips with difficult situation. It shows the will to find something to hold on, and to endure.

[13] **Henley**, *Credit and Debt in Indonesian History: Introduction*.

[14] **Papanek and Schwede**, *Women are Good with Money: Earning and Managing in an Indonesian City*.

[15] **Papanek and Schwede**, *ibid.*, WS-77.

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We envision a world in which economic and social relations are based on self-organization, care, solidarity and sustainability. Starting from a firm belief in the potential of local alternative economic practices, we wish to learn from our fellow commoners and inspire social change. Through facilitating physical and virtual spaces, we aim to produce, collect and share knowledge about how to support each other and build communities based on the commons.

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